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OR.

## The Gunmakers of World's End.

BY WM. H. MANNING,  
AUTHOR OF "DEEP DUKE," "WILD DICK TURPIN," "COLORADO RUBE," ETC., ETC.

### CHAPTER I.

#### A DESPERATE UNDERTAKING.

A DUSKY human figure lying at full length on a rough ledge—a Sioux Indian in all the picturesque, but dangerous, wildness of his natural state—with fierce eyes blazing with excitement as he glanced along the barrel of his rifle; and a second figure, slighter, fairer—that of a white girl of more than usual loveliness—riding through the gulch below at an easy pace.

Such were the actors in a scene quiet enough as yet, but fast approaching a startling crisis, for the Indian, thirsting for human life, was taking deadly aim at the girl, who was wholly unconscious of his proximity.

One touch of his finger on the trigger would send a bullet to the living target, and that touch would be made in a moment. It meant death to the girl.

SOMERVILLE SAW THE TORCHES PLAINLY, AND UNDERSTOOD EVERYTHING AT ONCE—SEVERAL MEN WERE DESCENDING THE ROPE LADDER.



The scene was a wild one even for that remote region, and at that time few feet save those of the wild Sioux warriors had trod the mountain passes. Open land was to be seen nowhere except in an occasional gulch, and rocks were everywhere. They lay piled one upon another, in shape of boulder, ledge and cliff, and the few trees and shrubs which found foothold in the crevices served only to make the wild place seem more ragged.

It was a strange place for a white woman, where only Sioux warriors had roamed before, yet this fair young girl was riding through the gulch, to all appearances, alone.

It was an opportunity the Indian on the rock was not slow to improve. He cared nothing for the fact that she was a woman, and a lovely woman at that; his instinct and training at once urged him on to send a bullet on its mission, and there seemed to be no danger of failure.

His rifle became motionless; his blazing eyes fixed; his muscles rigid; and in a moment more his finger would have pressed the trigger. But the touch was never made.

Suddenly the rocks rung with the report of another rifle, and the dusky figure on the ledge sprung half-erect, dropped his weapon, and fell back again a lifeless as the rock which had become his death-bed.

The girl in the gulch, rudely aroused from meditation, abruptly checked her horse and sat looking about in a startled manner.

Then down the narrow passage came another rider as fast as his horse could carry him, making a wild and exciting picture, yet not one to alarm the girl. A smile appeared on her face, and she looked at him with evident relief. He had but a few yards to cover, and soon drew up by her side.

"Prepare yourself for a rebuke!" she cried, lightly. "Do you know that you frightened me by firing?"

The new-comer smiled grimly.

"Was there nothing else to frighten you?"

"No. I am not easily alarmed."

"What do you suppose I fired at?"

"I really cannot imagine."

"Were you to ascend that ledge," he said, pointing, "you would find a dead Sioux Indian there. He is what I fired at, and I pulled trigger just in time. He, too, was about to shoot, and you were his target!"

The girl's face paled perceptibly.

"Are you in earnest?"

"I am."

"And he—was—"

"Taking sure aim at you. If I had been a second later with my own shot, you would not now be alive."

"Merciful Heaven! and I did not dream of danger."

"No, but you will remember that I warned you not to venture a hundred feet away from your companions. When you did so I saw you, for I had mounted to an elevated point to survey the country, and I saw you dash away from the others. Alarmed, I galloped back at once, and if you don't believe you have been in danger, go to yonder ledge and look for yourself."

There was something of reproof and sternness in his manner, and her lips quivered as she replied:

"I am humbled to the dust, for all this was the result of willful disobedience of your directions. I was foolish—mad. I can only say that I am sorry, and that it shall not happen again. And now I thank you for saving my life!"

She had made the acknowledgment of error with pretty penitence, and as she held out her hand he took it with a grave smile.

"I am amply repaid by thanks from you, and as for feeling resentment, you know I can't do it. All I ask is that you won't be rash again."

"I promise, and I will do all I say."

At this moment three men rode around a bend of the gulch, coming from the point the girl had recently passed. A heterogeneous trio they were. One was a tall, slender man in citizen's clothing, who was gray with age, and, evidently, no borderman; yet his bearing was so erect that one would instinctively surmise that he had once been a soldier. This was a fact; his name was Bennington, and he had left the army at the close of the civil war with the rank of major.

The second man was also tall, but one glance would reveal the veteran plainsman. He was Long Dave Cobb, a scout and guide of some reputation.

The last of the trio was a Pawnee Indian, who was called Windfoot.

Major Bennington rode forward and nodded to the girl's protector.

"I heard you fire—where is your game?"

"Up yonder, on the ledge," was the grim reply. "Will you go and look at it?"

"I will, for I want to stretch my legs. I am cramped with riding."

He dismounted and proceeded to carry out his purpose, but Long Dave Cobb looked gravely at the late marksman.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Have I said anything was wrong?"

"No, but it's sartin that Black Hills Ben would never 'a' fired in this region without a bigger mark than game!"

His remark implied a compliment, but he who had received it paid no attention. He had a reputation as a scout and Indian-fighter second to but few of the Western bordermen, and was supposed to know more about the Black Hills and adjacent country than any other white man of good repute. From this fact arose his sobriquet, though his real name was plain Ben Todd.

He kept his place with an air of unconcern until Major Bennington returned with a startled look on his face. Looking at Black Hills Ben he hastily said:

"There's a dead Indian up there—"

"I know," the scout carelessly said. "I shot him, just as he was about to shoot Miss Bennington."

"Claudia!" the major cried.

"It is true, father," she answered. "All this came of my disobedience. I galloped away from the rest of you, and only for Mr. Todd's unerring aim, I should dearly have repented my act."

"I let you go up, major," explained the scout, "so that you could see all. Let this be a warning to you, and keep my cautions in mind after this. There!—don't say a word. I am not speaking in anger, but I *must* be obeyed, or not one of us will go back to civilization. As I told you at the start, this is a mad, reckless expedition, anyhow, and death lurks at every step."

"Ef the gal was me, an' I was the gal," said Long Dave, logically, "I'd git scared an' back out. It would be a powerful relief to my nerves, but bein' as I am me, an' a man at that, I've got ter keep up my grit an' go on. But thar ain't no law ter prevent the gal from backin' out."

"Back out!" cried Claudia. "Never! Do you imagine that I have come all this distance to act the coward now?"

"It would not be cowardice," the scout gravely replied. "We are far from civilization and law. This is the land of Sitting Bull, the greatest red warrior of to-day. Few persons except Sioux have been here before, and most of those who came, died here. The Sioux want no whites here. These rocks, and gulches, and the open prairie, they hold to be theirs only, and they will kill us if they can for venturing here. Always hostile, they are just now in a particularly savage mood."

"Jest like hornets," averred Long Dave. "Black Hills Ben has been south an' can't say as much as I kin, but I'll eat my rifle ef the reds ain't ugly jest now. I suspect somebody's been stirrin' 'em up uncommon; anyhow, they're uncommon ugly."

"It may seem strange that we repeat this warning at such a late hour," the scout added, "but I wish you would turn back. Long Dave and Windfoot will guide you home, and I will go on alone."

"How would you find Dunstan Hughes?" Claudia demanded. "I, alone, of all our party, have seen him, or would recognize him if we met."

"I think I could find him," Black Hills Ben replied.

"But you are not sure."

"We are sure of nothing; least of all, are we sure that one member of our party, made up as it is now, will ever live to see the settlements again, if we keep on."

"There is strength in union. Why should you wish to go through all these dangers alone?"

The slightest possible smile moved the scout's lips.

"Such ventures have been the daily life of Long Dave and myself for years. We think nothing of them—if alone."

Miss Bennington sighed, and then steadily replied:

"Of course I understand, but I cannot turn back. If a Sioux warrior lurked at every step, I would go on, and if we fail, I do not want to go back alive."

"She'll git one wish, anyhow," muttered Long Dave.

"Remember," continued the girl, "that, back in the States, an innocent man lies in prison, sentenced to die the ignoble death of a murderer. Unjustly condemned, he is doomed to the gallows irrevocably unless Dunstan Hughes is found and brought back to save him. This must be done before September twelfth."

"Short time!" said the scout, half-unconsciously.

"That man—Edgar Wheaton—is my betrothed husband. For his sake I go to the land of the Sioux. Dunstan Hughes, alone, can prove him innocent, and only I can recognize Hughes. We have proof that he is among the Sioux, and we are on our way to find him. Mr. Todd, I would not turn back if ten thousand dangers were added to those already menacing us!"

The girl spoke with excitement, and new color mounted freely to her cheeks. Her voice rung out clearly, and, unconsciously, her fine form was drawn to its full height, while her eyes sparkled brilliantly.

A transient look of admiration crossed Black Hills Ben's face, and he promptly answered:

"You have heard the last opposition from me Miss Bennington. Your motive is a noble one;

your courage is grand. We will go on, and may our luck be as good as our intentions!"

With these words he turned and rode northward through the gulch, with the others following close after him. Long Dave took a fresh chew of tobacco and nodded to Windfoot, the Pawnee.

"We're all marked out fur crow-meat. I wish it had been in the course o' human natur' fur me ter have been born forty years later."

Long-Dave complained, but this was something which he always did, and when it came to fighting, no man could be braver than he. Black Hills Ben had not selected him blindly; he knew both his fellow-guides well.

The devoted party moved slowly through the mountains. If the dead Sioux had had any companions near, the keenest glances of the scout failed to discover them.

At the end of a mile they emerged from the hills and saw a prairie before them which stretched away for ten miles. Here was a chance to make more rapid progress, and they quickened their pace accordingly. Half the distance had been covered when Black Hills Ben abruptly reined in his horse.

"What's wrong?" asked the major, quick to comprehend that the scout was actuated by no common motive.

For answer Black Hills Ben pointed straight ahead, and all saw a strange and startling sight.

## CHAPTER II.

### WILD WEST WALT'S DISCOVERY.

WITHIN a little recess, which was like a pocket in the mountain, a solitary man sat eating his dinner. Around him were rocks in profusion and confusion, a cliff rising on one side to the height of two hundred feet. A wilder place it would have been hard to find, while it was so barren that the horse of the lone camper was making her dinner entirely on food brought there on her back.

Man and horse were alike of peculiar appearance.

The former had evidently seen nearly three-score years, and they had left him a tall, lank, bony, but hardy, person worthy of more than a passing glance. He bore his age rarely well, and the flaxen hair and yellowish beard which grew in eccentric abundance on scalp and chin showed no traces of gray. His face was a mass of wrinkles, but even they did not seem to indicate age especially.

Everything in the appearance of the man, including his dress, proclaimed the veteran borderer, and he looked like a natural part of the wild scene.

The mare seemed a fit companion for him. She, too, was well past her youth, and, like him, was of large frame and spare flesh. Her hair was of unusual length, making her look shaggy, and a less attractive animal of her species it would be hard to find.

Her master threw away a bone he had just cleared of all eatable substance.

"May as wal stop hyar," he said, speaking aloud. "Enough is as good as a feast, though some folks is bound ter hev the last morsel. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins? A glutton is a hog, an' hogs I don't like."

He arose, knocked the remains of his small fire more loosely about, and turned to his horse.

"How goes it with y-u, Pansy? Does yer stomach cry out like a voice from the wilderness, or be you—"

He paused suddenly. The homely mare had elevated her head and was restlessly sniffing the air. Instantly her master's rifle leaped to his shoulder and he turned toward the sole entrance to the pocket, but, though prepared for action, no one was visible. He glanced back at the mare.

"Smell 'em, Pansy—smell 'em?" he asked, in a quick, jerky voice.

Naturally, the mare did not answer, but her manner seemed just as intelligible to the borderman. He looked keenly toward the entrance to the pocket again, and then, with a motion to the mare, glided out with his rifle held ready for use.

He was thus brought to the side of a ravine which extended like a ribbon through the hills, and where he had a good view both north and south. His first glance caused his face to assume a look of surprise.

"Great snakes!" he exclaimed.

No wonder he was surprised. A horse was approaching, and on its back was a girl whose face was white and fair. The old rover had not supposed that any woman except the Sioux maidens was within many miles of his camp, and in his surprise he allowed the breach of his rifle to drop to the ground.

"Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?" he muttered. "Should as soon have expected to see an angel. A white gal—here! Great snakes! the days o' meracles are onto us ag'in."

The girl was approaching briskly—was almost there. The borderman must retreat to the pocket, or be observed. He decided not to retreat, although concealment was his policy, so, leaning quietly upon his long rifle, he awaited her arrival.

She came nearer, but, evidently not expecting to see any one, was within forty feet of him be-



fore he was discovered. Then she abruptly halted her horse and sat returning his gaze, though her manner was not as easy.

"Hullo, Princess!" said he, quietly. "We meet ag'in, an' not ag'in, neither, fur we never met afore. Has there been an 'arthquake, an' landed you up hyar?"

His question passed unheeded, but the girl, who had been looking at him sharply, abruptly asked:

"Who are you, sir?"

"Plump as yer own purty cheeks. Who be I? Wal, I'm Old Walt Wilkins, sometimes called Wild West Walt."

"You look like an honest man."

"I am, but 'tain't my fault. I was born so."

"Sir, I am in need of help."

"Great snakes! I don't say so. In trouble? I hope so, fur I'm hankerin' ter help you out. What is it?—Sioux, grizzlies, fevers, blizzards? Give me p'int; I'm jest a-dyin' ter wade in an' help ye!"

The girl had ridden nearer and was studying his face attentively. In her opinion it was an honest, prepossessing face, and a sigh of relief passed her lips.

"I feel that you are one of the honest scouts of the West, and a man I can trust."

"I'm a ranger an' rover, by trade, an' as fur trustin' me—great snakes! yes; you can do that ev'ry time, Princess."

"I have just escaped from Indians and white outlaws, and am in desperate need of help. I trust—I know you will be a friend to me."

"When I fail ter be a friend ter a woman in distress, may my hand forgit its cunnin' an' fail ter bring down the antelope. Trust me? When my time comes ter go under I ask no better end than ter die fightin' fur a woman, but I ain't in any haste ter die, nevertheless."

"Give me a chance to talk with you."

"Ride this way. Hyar is a nook in the hills whar one man kin lick twenty ef he's good on the lick. Walk in, Princess, an' you'll find me an' Pansy ter home."

His kind, genial manner touched the girl to the heart. She was braver than the average of her sex, but the perils which surrounded her had been great, and she had been oppressed by fears of known and unknown perils. Now a helping hand was outstretched, and the homely, but honest, face of the rover was like sunshine to her. She felt that she could trust him, and her need was desperate.

They went to the niche, and she abruptly drew a folded paper from her pocket.

"Read this!" she directed. "It will briefly tell the story which I might make long."

"I'll ask you ter read it aloud," he answered.

"My schoolin' was mostly outside the schoolhouse. Read aloud!"

She obeyed, and he listened with wonder:

"To whom it may concern:—

"I, Thomas Garrison, formerly of Chicago, write this with the hope that a messenger may be able to take it to some settlement. Should it fall into the hands of an honest white man, I beg that he will lose no time in placing it in the hands of some Government officer, and I implore such officer to furnish relief to me and my companions."

"I write this in the heart of the Sioux country, and I am one of over a score of white persons, men and women, held prisoner here. He who reads would never surmise why we are captives. Let me, then, explain that a great plot is being hatched by which all the western Indians, and thousands of lawless whites, will descend upon the settlements at no distant day. Sitting Bull is, of course, one of the leading spirits in the enterprise, but the real head is a white man, said to be a disgraced army officer. His name I do not know."

"The scope of the plot is remarkable. Besides the Indians, and the white outlaws of a dozen States and Territories, Indians, half-breeds and others will come on from Canada. In brief, it will be an uprising of a nature never before known. A vast army will be gathered, and it will fall upon the border towns and cities with one watchword only—'Booty!'

"But to explain why we are captives. The white leader is a man of unbounded audacity and ambition, and in this remote place he has started the manufacture of firearms. Twelve men skilled in this work have been kidnapped and brought here, and with them are six assistants and five women. We are confined in a strange valley in the hills—just where I don't know—and we work menaced by the rifles of the outlaws."

"It is work or die with us, and we are making rifles and revolvers daily. We are soon to begin upon cannons. It may seem like a fairy-tale to say that such work is going on here, but it is true. The white leader is determined that no inkling of the truth shall reach the forts or towns, and I am told that he spent years of preparation before we were brought here to do this work."

"I have no space to go further into details. Enough to say that if this scheme is not broken up, the western towns are doomed. I have said little of myself and the other prisoners. Now let me state, briefly, but earnestly, that we are in terrible peril. Our men can die, if need be, but we ask help for our women. In the name of Heaven, send us aid!"

"THOMAS GARRISON."

The voice of the girl died away, and the strange communication was read. Old Walt Wilkins, however, remained looking at her blankly, and it was several moments before he could command his voice.

"Great snakes!" he finally ejaculated.

"You see how it is," the girl nervously re-

plied. "I was one of the valley prisoners, but I made my escape. My name is Blanche Beauvais—a French name, as you will understand. My father is one of the prisoners. Nothing has been overstated in this letter, and you see the vital necessity of action. Think of the men and women left there in captivity and peril!"

"I do think o' them, an' ef my blood ain't b'ilin' the symptoms is deceptive. This story beats the record. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins? A gun-shop up among the Injuns! Wal, the age o' meracles is come ag'in!"

"You have heard all, and now I appeal to you for help," Blanche continued.

"An' not in vain, by sixty! I'm a free rover, I be, an' I go an' come as I please. It will now please me ter take you under my wing an' amble toward civilization. Come on! Pansy, this way. Princess, shall I help ye? No; in the saddle already, spry as a cat. Hyar we go. No rest now fur us. The red-skins are abroad in these hills like flies. It'll take piles o' wit ter pull through, but Pansy an' I are good fur it. She'll smell 'em out, an' I'll trounce their hides off. Come on!"

They rode from the pocket, and then southward along the ravine. The ranger talked as genially as ever, but his small, twinkling eyes were never at rest. They scrutinized every cliff and rock, and seemed to shoot glances about like the playing tongue of a snake.

Blanche was weaker than ever before since she left the captives in the valley. She had borne up heroically, and she now had some one to lean upon, and the reaction had come. She looked at the bony old guide, and her heart was full of gratitude and confidence in his honesty.

"I've heerd o' strange things," said the rover, breaking a silence, "but none quite ekul ter this. A gun-shop up in Sioux land. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"It is there, nevertheless."

"I ain't a gunmaker, myself—though I can p'int 'em tolerably well when they're made—but it stands ter reason that a good many diff'rent things are nec'ssary in makin' 'em. How do they git these up among the red-skins?"

"Bear in mind that the letter said the white leader spent years of preparation before the workmen were kidnapped and put to work at their trade."

"Princess, who is this man?"

"That I don't know. None of our company knew, nor did we ever see him."

"He's marked out a big job, an' I reckon he's dangerous. Men who gamble big always be, an' he'll undoubtedly make a panic in the hair trade when he lays his skulpers loose."

The rover raised his hat and caressed his own flaxen locks tenderly.

"The first barber-shop I see, I'll hev my head shaved. A chap named Demosthenes did it, an' his eloquence was amazin' arterward. I don't want ter be eloquent, but between a skulpin'-knife an' a razor, I'll patronize the razor ev'ry time. But, Princess, you ain't told how you escaped from the gun-shop."

"I used my wits—and deception," Blanche frankly confessed. "Such things are pardonable at times, you know. I made one of the outlaw guards believe I was pleased with his attentions, obtained leave to go out of the valley past his post, and while he thought I was enjoying the scenery, I was in rapid flight on a horse I stole from the outlaws."

"Traps and tomahawks! you did wal. I like ter see dust throwed in the man's eyes, when I ain't the man. Yes, you did well, an' I see you are a heroine. Good! I always did like heroines, when they're o' the female gender."

"Your conversation is light, but I see that you never relax your vigilance. Is danger so imminent?"

"These hills are like a whale, an' they're liable ter belch up Injuns at any minute, 'thout waitin' nine days like the whale Jonah owned. Yes, thar may be fightin' any second, with the Sioux careerin' round us like shootin'-stars. What'd you do in sech a case, Walt Wilkins?"

The ranger brushed a fly from Pansy's shoulder, and added in a matter-of-fact voice:

"Why, it stands ter reason that ef you couldn't run you'd fight!"

Just then the ravine and the hills ended abruptly. Beyond the fugitives lay a wide prairie, sparsely timbered. It was an oasis in that land of rocks and hills, and beautiful enough to please any eye. Ragged, frowning cliffs and ridges shut it in on four sides, and there it lay in calm quiet. It was inviting, but not until he had swept a keen glance all around did Wild West Walt venture beyond the cover of the rocks.

There was timber enough on the prairie to shelter two hundred Indians, and he had but little faith in the air of serenity which prevailed. He had gone on too many trails to ever become reckless.

"Caution is never throwed away," he observed, to Blanche, "though in this case 'tain't over-essential. Pansy can smell a red-skin at forty rods."

"Your horse, I believe?"

"That's jest it; my horse is Pansy, an' she's a superlative smeller. Her nostrils are charged with electricity, an' when the air sends a tele-

gram which says, 'Injuns!' she gits it by first mail. Keep yer nose wal up, Pansy. Smell 'em, smell 'em!"

The mare ambled on tranquilly, however, and they had reached the midst of the plain before anything of interest occurred. When the charge came, it came with startling force. Even Walt's keen eyes had seen nothing wrong, but his gaze could not penetrate the heart of the scattered motes. From them danger was to be expected; from them danger came.

Blanche, riding in deep thought, saw the rover's rifle suddenly leap to his shoulder. Her gaze flashed to the left. How had the scene changed! A grove was there, but, nearer yet, a score of horsemen were galloping down upon the fugitives. Blanche lost color. These riders, speeding madly forward, were Indians, and even her little-experienced eyes marked them as Sioux.

"Cling like a burr ter yer saddle!" ordered Wilkins, and then he gave the girl's horse a blow which sent him shooting forward at full speed.

There was no occasion to urge Pansy: she was ready to do her best; and the two animals galloped side by side. But like the wind came the Indians in pursuit, thirsting for the blood of the white fugitives.

### CHAPTER III.

#### FIFTY MEN AGAINST FIVE.

BLANCHE'S first emotion was one of terror and weakness as she saw the red pursuers. She knew what the Sioux of that particular time were—knew them to not only be preparing for a relentless war upon the whites, but utterly without mercy. Capture meant death, if their fancy pointed that way, and such a fate might be better than captivity.

After a few moments she grew calmer. Naturally one of the bravest of her sex, she rallied with surprising spirit. She glanced at the face of Wild West Walt. It was as placid as ever.

"Is there hope?" she asked.

"Thar's always hope, Princess. It's an article that never dies while a spark o' life is left. Speakin' more ter the p'int, a good bit depends on our hosses. Them red skulkers can't shoot straight at this distance, an' ef we kin hold our own, our chances are good."

"But can we?" Blanche demanded.

"Speak low; don't let Pansy hear ye. Sech a question would hurt her human feelin's despritley. No Injun hoss in the West kin overtake her, an' she knows it. Now ef your hoss is as good on a long run as he is on a short one, we needn't borrow no trouble. Don't worry, Princess."

"I wish I had your faith."

"You're sure to ketch it, though it may not break out until I've killed off them red-skins, one by one."

"Is faith, then, contagious, like a fever?" asked Blanche, assuming a lightness she did not feel.

"It's like, an' onlike. The weak an' sickly are most likely ter ketch fevers, while faith is only contagious ter such as are stout o' heart. I think that means you."

"I believe it does, sir. My courage increases."

"Knewed it would, Princess; knewed it would. I kin tell a hero when I see one, an' that's you."

But Walt was by no means as sanguine as he professed to be. He knew that their chances were desperate. Already a score of Sioux were rushing after them, and a hundred more might appear at any moment. Even if the present pursuers were not reinforced, the chances were that they could either run down the lone whites, or harass them among the hills until they would be forced to surrender or starve.

He would not tell the girl this, however, and if the worst came he was prepared to give up his life fighting for her. But another change of scene was before them.

Breaking through a belt of timber Walt's gaze suddenly became fixed, and, a moment later, an exclamation of surprise fell from Blanche's lips. A third party of riders had become visible—four men and a woman—and at least four of their number were of white skin.

Even Blanche knew that this was a surprising sight for that locality, but Wilkins seemed astounded.

"Great snakes!" he muttered, as soon as he could find breath, "the age o' meracles is come ag'in. More female characters in the Sioux deestrick! I shouldn't be surprised ef the 'hull kentry east o' the Mississippi' has been moved up this way. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

His view was suddenly disturbed. The third party had evidently seen all that they cared to see, and, as one, they abruptly wheeled and began urging the horses at full speed toward the eastern wall of the valley.

A quick change passed over the rover's face. "Rifles an' red-skins! can it be? Yes! No! I say yes, Walt Wilkins. Great snakes, Princess, the scene changes, an' I'll be burnt at the stake ef that ain't Black Hills Ben! D'ye hear me whisper? Hi! the atmosphere clears, an' ef we can jine forces, we'll make a mortal epidemic 'mongst the Sioux. Stick a pin thar!"



He ceased speaking, and immediately uttered a loud, peculiar, long-drawn yell. It was like, and yet unlike, the shout of other Western men, but it seemed very familiar to him Walt had pronounced Black Hills Ben. That person turned, waved his hand, and then motioned to the pair to follow in haste.

Walt looked grimly back at the Sioux.

"We hold our own," he said, "an' I've see'd the time I'd be right glad ter do that. Cheer up, Princess! We're goin' ter make a junction with Black Hills Ben, an' he's as good as twenty men. In a fight with the red-skins the odds'll be in our favor, ye see. One o' them other men I know, too. He's Long Dave Cobb, an' he's a fit mate fur Ben. Why, them two kin trounce all Settin' Bull's tribe, an' as fur me—wal, I'll be useful ter pick 'em up when they drop."

The three parties were galloping toward the hills, the two detachments of whites being near each other, while the Indians were not close enough to hazard a shot. In this way the wild race continued.

Wild West Walt's face had brightened. He knew that if they reached the hills alive, he and Black Hills Ben's party would join hands, and that meant a good deal. Desperate fighting was ahead, but the ranger valued this lightly.

If he could save Blanche he was willing to put his life in the greatest peril.

"Who do you suppose that girl is with them?" finally asked Blanche, who forgot peril in her curiosity.

"Might as wal guess on the number o' spears o' grass on this valley, Princess. This mornin' I'd 'a' willin'ly sworn thar was no white woman within a hundred miles o' hyar. Now I see two, an' I expect more ter crop up any minute. The age o' meracles is come ag'in, you see, an' I won't bet ag'in' anything."

"They were traveling north."

"They were, yes; but they turned out fur the Sioux. Perilousness is one o' Black Hills Ben's virtues."

"Can we really expect help from them? They are riding rapidly away. Are you sure they are not going to desert us?"

"Desart us! What? Black Hills Ben?"

One moment Walt looked almost angry, and then his old placid expression returned.

"Ef you knew Black Hills Ben as I do, ye wouldn't ask the question. He's a man who would never desert a friend; if he did anything wrong in sech a case, it'd be ter die fur that friend. Don't fear, Princess. He properly keeps whar he is; they'll reach the hills ahead on us; his quick wit will be needed an' used; an' by the time we git thar, he'll hev his plan all laid out. See?"

"Yes, and I also perceive that I have wronged the scout. I am sorry, and I ask your pardon."

"It's granted before it's asked. A man who won't forgive a pooty gal deserves never ter be wronged, by hickory!"

Walt dismissed the subject and looked back critically at the Sioux.

"A good, long distance fur a flyin' shot," he observed, "but I could drop one o' them yawlers. Observe this rifle, Princess? 'Taint no common rifle, d'ye understand? It's made my reputation as a crack shot, but I'm the poorest marksman this side of the Mississipp'. It's all in my rifle. It's charmed, the rifle is; an' I hev no more ter do with aimin' than my knife hez. Ef I hold it up, the rifle will do the rest. But I reckon I won't shoot until we git ter the cliffs. Thar's bound ter be a dispute thar 'tween red an' white, an' somebody'll git trounced."

Black Hills Ben's party was fast cutting down the last mile of the valley. They rapidly drew near the rougher country, and the scout was selecting their exact landing-place. To escape without a fight was impossible, and he must make the most of opportunities.

Walt and Blanche saw them take to the ledges, and the veteran nodded approval. There was a chance to get the horses back out of rifle-range, and when it came to defense, it would answer all requirements.

The other whites were not long in reaching the same place. Walt had directed Blanche to at once join the larger party, and this she proceeded to do. A word from the veteran sent Pansy up the incline after the other animals, and though the girl's horse at first rebelled, he yielded after a brief resistance. A very convenient recess furnished shelter for all the quadrupeds, and, when they were once there, they needed no further care.

Wilkins joined the other men and shook hands with Black Hills Ben and Long Dave Cobb. Blanche and Claudia Bennington were already in conversation. The Indians were still coming at full speed, and they yelled all the louder as they saw that the whites had turned at bay.

"Fine music, that," said Walt, savagely, "though pitched an octagon too high. What's the prospect?"

"We must fight," Ben tersely answered.

"All but me," added Long Dave. "Don't be surprised any minute ter see me run."

"We are five men," continued the scout, "and I know what we are good for. We can beat off those Indians!"

"Ef we can't," affirmed Walt, "we ought ter

be kicked. I don't part with my hair until I kin sell it at a better price. Ef I hadn't needed my skulp on my head, Natur' would have put it some'rs else."

There was ample time for their simple preparations. Where rocks were everywhere, there was no trouble about finding a breastwork. Each of the defenders acted for himself, and dropped down where it suited his fancy. They thus became nearly invisible to the foe, while their own targets were such as could not be missed by such men.

Five rifles were thrust forward, and five pairs of eyes looked along the barrels. Some of those yelling warriors would never again be seen alive at the Sioux village.

The calmness of the defenders was something remarkable, and even Claudia, who had seen far less of peril than Blanche, was firm. This was one of the things she had been warned that she would meet, and she bore up bravely. No common motive had brought her to Sioux-land. Back in the States an innocent man languished in prison, condemned to death.

Unless the present danger could be overcome, and her allotted work finished, her lover would yield up his life on the scaffold. She shivered at the thought, but the hand which grasped her revolver did not relax.

"If it comes to a hand-to-hand struggle, you and I can do our part," she said.

"Certainly," Blanche answered. "I expect to fight with the rest."

Suddenly the rocks rung with the almost simultaneous discharge of five rifles, and as many bullets went whistling toward the Sioux. A moment later five riderless horses were to be seen in the valley. Major Bennington, a fair shot, had fired in good luck, and the borderers could not miss at that distance.

The advance of the red enemy was not checked but, suddenly, a shrill whistle reached the defenders. They looked past the Sioux, and a new gravity was then to be seen on each face. They had seen that which might well alarm brave men.

Another party of horsemen had appeared—was galloping forward. They were not Indians, but the defenders promptly marked them as quite as bad. Their faces were white, but in their evident friendliness to the Sioux, their wild, lawless manner and other characteristics, all marked them as those most-to-be-despised of all border characters—white outlaws. Walt Wilkins thought of the men said by Blanche to exist at the mountain valley, and drew his own conclusions.

These men were dashing forward in a body—at least two scores in all—and if there had been any doubt of their intention to join forces with the Sioux, it was dispelled by the manner of the latter. That whistle had clearly had a well-defined meaning with them, and they at once swept around in a circle to join the reinforcement.

"The situation grows complicated," observed Walt.

"It will be a hard fight now," declared Black Hills Ben.

"Don't be s'prised ef I run," added Long Dave.

His companions knew he would die at his post, if need be, and his words passed unheeded.

"Fifty men against five?" said Major Bennington, with great gravity. "Wouldn't it be policy for us all to retreat?"

"Not a foot!" Ben firmly replied. "We now have the enemy in open ground, and we must win or lose at the brow of this ledge. Stand firm, every man!"

It looked like sure death to all. How they could expect to win against such odds was a mystery, but the borderers had never been calmer. Heroism was never better personified.

But now the allies had joined forces, and the blood-curdling yells of the Indians were mixed with the shouts of their equally merciless companions as the whole wild crew charged down upon the devoted band, eager for their blood, and expecting to sweep them away at a breath.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE FIGHT ON THE LEDGE.

Down toward the ledge came the allies, and a wilder scene would be hard to imagine. If the white outlaws were as hard fighters as the Indians, it would be a bad gang to defeat. Major Bennington looked somewhat anxiously toward Black Hills Ben.

"Tell me plainly what our chances are, Mr. Todd," he said, in a steady voice.

"A good motto in this case is, 'Never say die!'" the scout quietly answered. "It will be wonderful if we don't have a hard fight, but they have not won yet. You will observe that these ledges are hard to climb. While the enemy are thus engaged we must get in our work with the revolvers, and if they do win, it will be a costly victory. Mark that down!"

A fresh burst of yells came from the allies; they swung their weapons wildly, and rolled on like a resistless ocean wave.

Wild West Walt deliberately took a fresh supply of tobacco into his mouth, and then held

out the remainder toward Windfoot, who lay next to him.

"Chaw, Injun?" he grimly asked.

Windfoot made a gesture of disgust, but vouchsafed no other reply.

"Suit yerself, but I reckon ye don't know the virtues o' the weed. It quiets the narves, an' builds up the constitution amazin'. It's helped me through many a sickness. Nothin' like it in fevers, pestilences an' epidemics."

"Ready, all!" directed Black Hills Ben, in a clear voice. "Give them a volley, and then reload with all possible speed. Now, fire!"

The five rifles cracked almost as one, and four of the allies went down. A fifth man halted his horse and gave evident signs of distress. But the others at once swung themselves over the side of their horses and became almost invisible, and the dark line came shooting forward as before.

Their yells, if possible, grew more demoniac.

There was a rattling on the ridge, and each of the defenders rapidly prepared for a second shot, but the enemy had advanced dangerously near. Only a small extent of prairie separated them from the ledges, and the hottest part of the fight was at hand.

Claudia looked at their friends in wonder.

"Such bravery is almost past belief," she said, trying to make her voice steady, and, herself, win a reputation for coolness.

"They are Northwest bordermen," Blanche proudly replied. "Such men fear nothing. Wait until you see them fighting hand-to-hand, if you would know what heroism and deathless valor are."

Claudia shivered. Brave as she was, cool as she tried to be, she had not the experience and composure of the French girl. Her heart was weighted down with horror. This scene seemed like a glimpse of Inferno, and the yelling allies like warriors unloosed by the prince of darkness. She pressed her hand to her aching eyes, to shut out the picture beyond.

The rifles were discharged again. This time the allies were too close to admit of a failure, and every shot went home. Scarcely had the bullets found lodgment before the riders swung erect in their saddles. The fatal rifles were empty, and it was their turn at last. Their weapons leaped to their shoulders, and a shower of bullets went rattling against the rocks.

"Rain is fallin'," quoth Walt Wilkins, with unfailing coolness. "Thought it would be so; the sun set last night in a bank o' clouds."

But now the allies are at the foot of the ledges. Beyond that point their horses cannot go, and they leap off and dash at the rocks agilely. A chorus of yells floats up to the defenders; weapons rattle on the ledges; red climbers and white are mingled; and the wave comes on irregularly, but actuated by one impulse.

There is no reprieve for them. They are within revolver-shot, and the fusillade begins. Coolly, systematically, determined to waste no shot, the little band keeps up the work of destruction.

The ascent is not an easy one for the allies. The shelving rocks baffle, annoy and retard them, and all the while they laboriously fight with Nature, that deadly rain descends upon them from the summit.

Walt Wilkins feels a presence beside him. He glances up and sees Blanche Beauvais.

"Don't, Princess!" he cries, in alarm. "One o' the red heathen may shoot—"

"My place is here with the rest of you," she replies, unfalteringly. "See! I do not carry an empty revolver!"

And her delicate hand works the gleaming weapon with machine-like regularity.

"Great snakes! it ain't no time fur courtship," says Walt, "but I swar I love ye, Princess!"

Then his unfailing hand drops a brawny Sioux, and the work goes on. But now the allies are at the top. Their dead carpet the ledge below, but the survivors are eager for the next act in the drama. The fire of battle is in their eyes and they are blind to death, danger or numbers. They only know why they are there, and their yells peal out as before.

They reach the breastwork, and the defenders spring upon them like tigers. Other yells sound on the air now, and the rush of the borderers is like a tidal wave. Before that assault the allies are swept back, but only because each scout seems like a host in himself. Where their blows fall, there is destruction.

It is over in a space of time comparatively brief, and such of the allies as remain are in full retreat down the ledges. They go defeated and decimated, and, for once even dismayed. A victory has been won by the defenders, but only through desperate efforts.

If further explanation is needed, it lies in the fact that, out in the valley, a portion of the outlaws sit on their horses and gaze in silent dismay. At the last moment their courage had failed; they dared not make the assault with their comrades.

The battle had been lost and won because of their cowardice. Had all gone up the ledges, it would be rash to say that victory would have been with the defenders.

A victory had been won, however, and a signal one, too. Nobody thought to count those



who had fallen, but the incline below the breast-work was thickly strewn with those who had died in a bad cause.

Walt Wilkins again indulged in tobacco, and again held out what remained to Windfoot.

"Chaw, Injun?"

Windfoot shot an indignant glance at the questioner and turned away, but at that moment the voice of Black Hills Ben arose:

"Pards, it's time for us to get out. There is no fear of another assault, but the enemy will enter the hills, scatter and try to surround us. To horse, every one, and let us try for a good start before they suspect that we are gone!"

Everything was favorable for a secret departure, and they went with celerity, the scout leading the way, and Walt and Long Dave bringing up the rear.

"Rather an int'restin' dispute," observed Wilkins.

"Sorter, sorter, old man; but do ye know you come nigh bein' without me in the fracas?"

"No; was we?"

"I'll eat my rifle ef 'twa'n't so. I wished then that I'd been born forty year later, an' I had a good mind ter run. I had, by blazes!"

"Should 'a' run myself ef the dispute had lasted much longer. I was so scared that the butt o' my revolver melted in my hand, an' my legs was so weak I heerd the bones snappin' in two."

"I was so pale," asserted Dave, "that my face got ter be like a lookin'-glass. I could see my eyes in it, an' they was as big as the crown o' your hat."

"I kin believe it. When the charge come I quaked so that my heart riz clear up in my mouth, an' I tuk my ramrod an' jammed it back down my throat."

"You'll git it jammed ag'in ef you don't quit axin' Mr. Windfoot ter take a chaw. That Injun is a peccoliar chap, an' red-hot ag'in' ter-barker an' rum. Don't ax him ter chaw ag'in, or he'll wade in an' carve ye all up."

"I'll think it over," Walt promised.

The party was moving on as rapidly as the nature of the course would allow. Black Hills Ben rode silently at the front, his keen eyes ever on the alert for danger. Well aware that any moment might bring them face to face with new foes, he neglected no precaution, and scanned every cliff and defile with great care. If he had spoken plainly he would have prophesied that not one of the party would be alive a day later, but they were in the venture beyond redemption and his courage did not waver.

Blanche and Claudia rode side by side, exchanging confidences. The one told of the valley prisoners; the other of the desperate need that had sent her to Sioux-land. Blanche saw that their course was toward the north—not the direction, certainly, in which lay the settlements she had been so eager to reach—but she was too sensible to demur.

For the time they must only think of evading their foes.

Walt rode forward to her side.

"How's yer courage, Princess?" he genially asked.

"Good, my friend; never better," she bravely replied.

"An' you're only a del'kit girl I could put in my pocket. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins? But be of good cheer; we'll come out all right. Sech troubles are all in the course o' natur'. Man is born ter trouble, an' woman's heart is so tender she's bound ter share them. Trouble is bound ter come. In the States it's malaria, hay fever, funerals an' weddin's; on the border it's Injuns, bullets, an' skulpin'-knives."

"Do you anticipate further trouble?" Claudia asked.

"In the course o' natur', it may come."

"Even now the Indians may be very near us," she added, remembering her own late escape.

"Not so. Observe Pansy. See her placid composure. Ef Injuns was nigh, she'd smell 'em. That hoss has got a most amazin' smell!" the ranger declared.

"I hope you are right."

"I'm always right when I depend on Pansy's nostrils."

The rover remained beside the girls and talked steadily, but it was with more than a gallant or trivial object. His attentive eyes perceived that, try as hard as they might to bear up, they were in a nervous and downhearted mood, and he was there to encourage them all he could, and, as far as was possible, to banish grim realities from their minds.

The little company wound through the gulches, now moving at good speed where the way was open, then barely creeping along rocky, broken ground where the horses had to pick their own way with care.

Long Dave brought up the rear, and his duty was well done. At any moment the enemy might appear on their trail, but while Long Dave was there, no one could approach very close unseen.

At last Black Hills Ben paused and waited for the others to join him.

"Here we will stop awhile; perhaps till tomorrow," he said.

Claudia looked about with unconcealed disapprobation; the place was far from being her

ideal of a pleasant camp. They had been passing through a canyon, the walls of which rose from one hundred feet to double that distance. The width was about equal to the first distance, as an average, though even wider just behind them.

At one point the bed of the passage was not over sixty feet wide, while the walls reached out toward each other until, approaching at a sharp angle, they almost met above, leaving only a narrow strip of sky visible.

It was a dark, gloomy place, but Walt, viewing it only practically, nodded his approval.

"A right good camp," he commented. "Hyar we shall be nigh about screened from hostile view, while we kin see the hull bed o' the kenyon; while ef it comes ter a dispute, I reckon we kin trounce the inemy handsomely."

"You grasp all its features at once," Ben replied. "Here we will camp. Yonder is water, and we have food for man and beast."

"I am too old a soldier to question the wisdom of my leaders," said the major, uneasily, "but may I ask why we don't go on, and improve every moment in flight?"

"Because there is a prairie country beyond, and it would not be safe to venture there blindly. Before we go, scouting must be done. On its result depends the question of whether we advance or remain here over night."

"Wise as ever," Bennington cheerfully admitted.

They dismounted, and while Long Dave took charge of camp, Ben spoke earnestly with Walt and Windfoot. This done, he and the Indian departed on the reconnaissance, one going up, the other down the canyon.

"What they don't find out, we don't want ter know," observed Walt. "Observe the caution they use. They are men who know their business, ef the Injun won't use the weed."

"Do you remain in charge of camp?" asked Blanche.

"Not exactly. Long Dave is sutlerer, or committee, or whatever the sojer tarm is; but I'm not ter go fur away. Mebbe you notice that fissure leadin' up the cliff? That's a natural ladder, built by the Goths an' Huns in old times. Black Hills Ben says it leads clear up the cliff. I go thar fur a brief squint, but not ter ventur' beyond the camp. I shall be hyar, an' not hyar, an' I sha'n't be gone long."

"I hope you will not, friend Wilkins. I feel safer with you near at hand."

"Do ye, Princess? Glad ter hear ye say so, fur I'm a lump o' vanity. While I'm gone, keep yer eyes on Pansy. Ef thar's reds within forty rods, she'll smell 'em. A powerful smell is that old chum o' mine. Good-by, but don't be nervous while I'm gone."

The rover went to the fissure, which was just beyond the convergent part of the walls, and began the ascent. It was no easy task, but he possessed patience and strong limbs, and gradually drew near the top. As he did so he narrowly watched the crest of the opposite cliff; he would offer a tempting target to any enemy who might be there.

He reached the top in safety, and then deliberately sat down between two rocks. In this position he made little show, while a considerable area of cliff, ridge and scraggly timber was open to his view.

"Nary sign," he said, after studying this picture for awhile. "It's like a pesky volcano. Up hyar on the brim all is quiet ez a May mornin', but thar is fire an' brimstone down in the gulches, all a-seethin', an' some on it takes the shape o' Sioux skulpers. It's in the course o' natur' that thar'll be trouble, an' somebody 'll git trounced like sixty!"

He arose and moved forward lightly. Beyond him was a rough bit of country, which was so covered with boulders and bushes that he could see nothing. He intended to explore it and then return.

This work was nearly finished when his light steps were suddenly arrested, his muscles grew rigid, and he peered ahead with marked keenness. Something suspicious had reached his ears or eyes.

One moment he stood like a statue; then, stooping slightly and holding his rifle ready for use, he glided forward more like a shadow than a man.

The adjacent bushes held some secret, and duty and inclination at once urged him to solve it. Deadly danger might lurk there, but danger had been his daily companion for years.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE CREEPING SIOUX.

WILD WEST WALT moved forward with extreme caution. He had heard a sound like a human laugh, and wished to know who had uttered it. As he advanced voices became distinctly audible, and he shaped his course according to the point from which they sounded. Finally, reaching a desired position, he knelt behind a rock and parted the curtain of leaves before him.

Two men were visible. Near at hand the embers of a fire were dying out, and it was apparent that they had encamped there and eaten their dinner, and were still without matters of importance to occupy their time.

One of the pair lounged on the ground, smoking and toying with a revolver. His air was careless, and he seemed disposed to take life easy. His age was less than twenty-five.

His companion, a man older by ten years, sat upright and maintained an impassive deportment. He was a man dark of complexion, with black hair and beard, keen, dark eyes, and a face at once swarthy, strong, stern and sour.

Both were clearly of unadulterated white blood, but Walt Wilkins experienced no pleasure on discovering them. He was enough of a physiognomist to feel that they were men whose acquaintance no honest person would desire. Knowing as he did of the presence of white outlaws near at hand, he had no trouble in placing these men.

Each, he felt sure, was a knave at heart, and he of the swarthy face would be dangerous when he was so inclined. He would be fertile of conception, merciless of execution and ready of resource, and his strength of mind was not to be questioned.

This man was speaking.

"I want nothing to do with the beauties of the valley," he curtly declared. "Pretty faces have no charm for me, and I can safely say they never had. Let those who live in the States make love if they will; it is not a fit occupation of the Western adventurer."

"But, my dear Killough," quickly returned his companion, "you have not been under fire as I have. You have not seen Blanche Beauvais."

Walt Wilkins started. The name at that time was the presage of trouble to come.

"What of it?" Killough coldly asked.

"To see is to love."

"Nonsense!"

"I tell you she is bewitchingly irresistible. I have had my share of worldly experience, but I tell you plainly that my heart was never touched before as it has been by Blanche's bright eyes."

"And you aspire to be a warrior of the great Confederation of the West!"

"I do."

"You would make a better parlor knight."

"Come, Jud, you are too severe, and you rather nettle me. Let me make a request. Go with me to the valley, and see my beauty. It will not be a lost journey, for the village of prisoners is well worth seeing. There, day by day, they are manufacturing the weapons we are to use when we fall destroyingly upon the border."

"Two of the cutthroats, sure!" thought Walt. "I'd like ter wade in an' trounce 'em, but I reckon their day ain't come. Mr. Killough, I'll remember you, an' you an' me may yit fall to an' devour each other."

"I have no idle curiosity," the swarthy-faced man replied. "The valley is in charge of good men, and I am content to do the work the Grand Chief has marked out for me."

"Tell me of him, Jud."

Killough's face grew darker with an angry scowl.

"Burt Starbuck, you are a fool!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know that no one can tell of him?"

"You obey his orders—how do you get them?" "Not directly from him. To the best of my knowledge, I have never met him. Even if I had, it is his wish that he should remain unknown and, as one of his lieutenants, I shall respect his wishes."

"You needn't speak so sharp," Starbuck replied, with a sulky air. "I don't care what he is like. Also, if you admire tramping about the country, go on."

"I will. A week hence I may be two hundred miles away."

"And I," added Starbuck, "may be back at the valley, basking in the smiles of fair Blanche."

"Does she return your love?"

"Well—no."

"Favor you?"

"Not even that."

"She'd be a fool ef she did!" muttered Walt.

"And," pursued Killough, "she knows you to be one of her captors?"

"Yes."

"Then, my word for it, you had better conquer your foolish fancy. The girl will never care for you; she will cast off your love with disdain."

"She had better not!" declared Starbuck, with a dark scowl. "If she angers me, she will repent it to the day of her death."

"Well, let us drop your Blanche, as a subject, and speak of war. By the way, it is odd that Swift Eagle does not return. What can have delayed him?"

Walt Wilkins did not hear the reply. Another sound had arrested his attention, and he threw a rapid glance to his left. The result rather startled him—he had looked none too soon. A Sioux Indian was creeping toward him like a panther, and his burning eyes, and the ugly knife in his hand, told the object of his secret advance.

Killough's last words suddenly became more pregnant. He had asked why "Swift Eagle" did not return, and here was a bloodthirsty savage creeping, cat-like, upon the veteran.

It was a critical situation. Walt's acute hearing had given him timely warning, and it would



be easy to shoot this red warrior and bound away before the white men could harm him, but, in the present case, this would never do. Helpless women were close at hand, and secrecy was the policy of their defenders. A rifle-shot—an alarm—at that moment might prove fatal to all the party in the canyon.

It flashed upon Walt that he must overpower this would-be assassin without disturbance, but the outlaws were only a few yards distant. True there were no leaves or dead twigs to give alarm, but it seemed out of the question to subdue the Sioux silently.

"But it must be did—by hickory! it must!" thought the rover. "Walt Wilkins, remember Princess an' put yer best foot forrard."

Nearer came the Indian. He had marked out a course and intended to follow it. For some reason he did not see fit to use a fire-arm, but aspired to drive his knife home in the back of the white man.

His movements were wonderful cautious, and he had no reason to suppose he had been seen. Walt lay like a part of the rock. The Indian came so near that he could have touched the rover's garments. Then he raised the glittering knife.

His experienced eyes marked a vital point; his grasp grew more rigid; the knife descended.

Somehow, his wrist fell into Walt's grasp—it would have puzzled the Sioux to say how. The hand had intervened and saved the veteran's life, and that gaunt form suddenly wheeled as though on a pivot.

The next instant Walt's remaining hand had compressed his dusky enemy's throat, stifling all sounds he would have made, and he was whirled over on his back. Many an Indian had found the rover a deadly adversary before that day, and in such an emergency it was not likely that he would be backward.

All depended upon disposing of the Sioux quickly, silently. He was determined to do it if such a thing was possible.

The would-be surpriser had been surprised, and a single moment's indecision was fatal to him. He recovered his wits, and his strong limbs suddenly quivered with the premonitory symptoms of a stout resistance, but he was too late. His own knife, wrested from his grasp, was turned upon him and a blow was struck. A start—a great, but fruitless, effort to cry out—another quiver of his limbs, this time involuntary, and the end was come.

Walt glanced toward the bushes.

The quiet murmur of voices was still audible. Even to the veteran it seemed almost impossible that he had accomplished the work so silently, but the proof was beyond the bushes and under his knee. He raised the body with an effort, carried it a few yards, and concealed it in a thicket.

This done he obliterated all signs of the struggle—an easy task in the sandy soil—and then glided back toward the canyon. He did not think it prudent to spy upon Killough and Starbuck any further.

He descended the cliff and found the camp as he had left it. They had seen no enemy, and he openly stated that such had been his experience, but privately told Long Dave all that he had seen. The gravity of the situation was undeniable. They were literally in the midst of their enemies, and only that the hills were so broken—so cut up in all directions by canyons that crossed and recrossed each other in bewildering profusion—they could not have evaded discovery so long.

The blow might come at any moment.

Blanche approached Walt.

"Mountaineer, you say you saw no hostile signs?"

"Sech was the drift o' my remarks, Princess."

"Then allow me to ask how your knife became stained with blood?" she quickly added.

Walt started, and dropped his eyes in confusion to the knife. He had wiped it after disposing of the Sioux, but not so thoroughly as to remove all traces. He had been so sure of preserving his secret from the girls that he was not prepared to offer any excuse, and he said nothing.

"Come, confess that you have met an enemy," she added.

"Sence you insist, there was a dispute, but I didn't meet nobody. The creetur' crept up behind me, but he's done with creepin'. He got trounced, an' the Sioux nation is depopulated one, by hickory!"

"You would have concealed the fact from us. Foolish, unjust Walt Wilkins!"

"Say it ag'in! I like ter be scolded that way, an' I'll trounce a red-skin ev'ry day while we keep comp'ny. Thar is that about yer eyes an' face, Princess, that creates a commotion under my ribs on the left side. You 'fect me as another gal did once, though I don't s'pect you're jest like her. She snared me in her ha'r, which was three yard long and yarler as yarler could be, an' then she developed a taste fur ornaments the female kind don't ginerally cotton to. Nothin' would do her but she must hev a c'lection o' skulps, an' I re'lly killed an Injun ev'ry day fur her, fur goin' on eleven year."

"My taste doesn't run that way."

"Thought not. I reckon you captur' more

hearts than skulps. Ef you don't, the days o' meracles has come. Why, I'll wager suthin' that even them miser'ble outlaws at the valley fell in love with ye."

"I hope not!" and Blanche shivered prettily.

"You said that you 'scaped by pullin' the wool over one feller's eyes," dryly returned the ranger.

"That I must admit."

"Good! He's one. What's his name?"

"Cotton, I think."

"Go on; name the rest. Love an' matrimony is my best grip, and ef you want advice, come ter me. Go on, Princess; who's the next victim?"

Walt was talking with far more of an object than was apparent on the surface, but he had a reason for his roundabout course. He affected a playful manner to cover his advance.

"The subject is anything but a jesting one," returned Blanche, with a slight shiver, "but I am well aware that I had at least one other—and far more unwelcome—admirer there. He was a man of some influence, and I feared him as I would a wolf. His name was Burt Starbuck."

Walt had gained his object, and without betraying himself. Blanche knew the man he had lately seen—knew and feared him. The rover began to wish that Starbuck, instead of the Sioux, had fallen before his knife.

"Heaven grant that I never see him again," she added.

"Amen! But ef you should meet him, an' he merlests you, whisper it ter me. I ain't much on the shoot, but my rifle is a remarkable weepion, an' ef I only hold it up I reckon it'll blow Mr. Sawbuck inter a few million disconnected fragments. But here comes Black Hills Ben an' Windfoot."

The two had walked quietly into camp, and their manner told no tales.

"What news?" the major asked.

"The same old story."

"Indians?"

"Indians and outlaws. This is no time to mince matters; I'll admit that the hills are literally full of them. Night is at hand, but it will not be a time of rest to us. I give you all until eleven o'clock to sleep; after that, the entire night must be spent in flight."

"Toward the south?" asked Blanche, who had not forgotten why she left the secret valley.

"No; toward the north. I understand why you ask, but you must yield a point. I will lead you where I think the danger least menacing, and in due time we may help your friends, the gunmakers. One false move now, and they will never be helped by any of us."

"Do as you think best, Mr. Todd; I don't doubt your wisdom in the least, nor do I want to fall into the hands of the bloodthirsty Sioux."

"Sioux thick as leaves of forest," sententiously observed Windfoot, who never spoke except when speech was necessary.

He recalled Walt Wilkins from a period of meditation, and that person promptly produced his tobacco.

"Chaw, Injun?" he innocently inquired, but Windfoot turned away with an angry, but indistinct, muttering.

"One thing more," added Ben. "During my scout I found something which, though a trifle in itself, may well be termed a novelty in these parts."

He had taken a pasteboard card from his pocket, and he now handed it to Claudia. He had attached no importance to it, as it was only a man's photograph, and was not prepared for what followed.

Claudia had no sooner looked at it than a swift change passed over her face; the color left her cheeks, her eyes dilated, and she recoiled like one who had received a blow.

"This picture!" she gasped, almost wildly.

"Where did you get it?"

"In a gulch, half a mile away. May I ask—"

"Merciful heavens! it is the picture of Dunstan Hughes—the picture of the man we have come all this distance to seek. He is alive; he is near here at this moment. Quick, Black Hills Ben! lead the way to where you found—lead me there! This man must be trailed down and found. I care not if a million dangers menace us; Dunstan Hughes is near, and I will go to him. Lead the way!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### RIDING AMONG BULLETS.

CLAUDIA had lost all her calmness. Her eyes were glowing; the color had returned to her cheeks in a swift current; her bosom heaved; and she spoke with a wildness which startled all her companions. A mood like hers does not always change at once, and there was no knowing what would come of it now.

Black Hills Ben felt his inability to cope successfully with this case, and looked quickly at Major Bennington.

The latter came forward at once.

"My dear Claudia, be calm," he urged. "What you ask is not to be thought of. I feel sure that trailing is out of the question here,

and even if it was feasible, you would at once run into the midst of the Sioux."

"What of it?" she cried. "I could, at least, find Dunstan Hughes."

"At a time when you could not see him alone, nor get him to leave his wild companions. On the contrary, you would become a hopeless prisoner."

"He might be found alone."

"The chances are against it."

"I, for one, am willing to risk it. Mr. Todd, I ask you to accompany me. The rest of our party need not risk their lives. Will you go?"

"Miss Bennington," the scout replied, "I ask you to remember one thing. I have just found this picture, but it may have been lying there a week."

A swift change passed over the girl's face. Excited she was, but not to the degree of having lost all reason. The last argument appealed to her as irresistible logic, and she at once became silent. She still saw, in imagination, that unhappy prisoner in an Eastern cell waiting for her to rescue him, but this could not be done by rash haste.

Suddenly raising her gaze again to Ben's face, she quietly replied:

"If you say that what I ask is unwise, I will yield."

"I do say it, and I will work all the harder for you if you will be guided by my advice."

"It shall be as you say."

The storm was averted and Claudia did not again express a desire to go on the trail, but she kept the picture of Dunstan Hughes with jealous care. It might yet be the means of finding the man; in any case, unless signs were deceptive, she had proof that she was on the track.

The party settled down to pass the next three hours in quiet rest. Ben advised that all except Long Dave and himself endeavor to get sleep, but no one made any move in that direction. Time wore slowly on. Once they heard the distant report of a rifle, but not a living thing came within the scope of their vision.

Night had fallen, and in the canyon it was superlatively dark. The place was somber in the extreme, and though the borderers did not heed it, there were troubled minds in camp. All, however, were glad when the scout gave the word to move on again.

The horses were saddled; they mounted and rode away through the gulch. Ben and Windfoot led the way, Long Dave was the rear guard, and the others rode together between these points.

Their present move was at once one of great importance and one fraught with peril. The borderers believed that they could not remain in the hills another day without being discovered, while, if their flight was successful, they might by this change of base shake off the enemy. But every foot of the way was a place of danger. At any moment they might run upon a large party of Sioux or outlaws, or some lone scout might see them and then send out the alarm.

They had about one chance in ten of escaping notice.

Blanche looked at Walt Wilkins and, feeling the silence oppressive, asked if there was danger in conversation.

"Not fur a voice like yourn," the veteran answered, "fur it's a cross 'tween a murmurin' brook an' the tinkle o' a bell. Now I've knowed men—thank fortun' we ain't got sech hyar!—who couldn't tune their voices lower down than the roar o' a buffler bull. Sech men orter be berated as nuisances—squelched, d'ye see? They ain't o' no use 'cept in Congress. whar noise ranks above brains, I've heerd say."

"And brains are necessary here."

"Great snakes! yes—hyar, ef anywhar. We've got a good sprinklin' on 'em, too. Look at Black Hills Ben. He's well supplied. So is Pansy! Jest observe her, Princess. Some folks sneers at hosses 'cause they can't talk, but, in my opinion, they was made dumb so they couldn't put man ter shame by talkin'."

"There is something in your idea."

"Thar's truth an' logic, anyhow," the ranger answered.

"I suppose you feel safe as long as Pansy shows no signs of smelling the enemy."

"Yes; her smeller is ter be depended on, an' it's saved many a life afore now. Once she woke me up in the middle o' the night, an' informed me in hoss style that she smelled reds. I mounted an' rid off, givin' her a loose rein. She took me a hund'ed mild before mornin', an' we 'rived jest in time ter save a band o' miners from bein' wiped out o' existence. That was a long range smell, so ter speak."

"No doubt Pansy is a valuable animal."

"She sart'ly is. She was one o' a litter o' thirteen colts, an' I picked her out afore the brood could stan' alone; no easy job, as they was all o' one pedigree, but Pansy has out-ran, out-lived an' out-smelled the hull lot."

A stone rattled down to the slope to the right. Walt's rifle was partially raised, but he lowered it after one keen survey of the suspicious quarter.

"Nothin' but an' 'arthquake, I reckon."

"Do your hopes increase, friend Walt?"



"They do, an' they're gettin' mastodomical. 'Tis said that a camel kin hardly pass through a needle's eye by right smart squeezin', an' this seems likely; but Ben Todd is doin' the needle act with a rigiment o' us, an' I reckon we shall git through ef the Injuns don't yank the thread ter pieces."

The walls of the canyon grew lower until only an acclivity remained on either side. There the darkness was less intense, and the girls felt relieved, but the borderers hardly shared their feeling. In the increased light they made prominent objects for hostile eyes.

The expected alarm did not come, however, and silence was only broken by the movements of their own party. Possibly all of the allies slept, but the fugitives would not be safe until that sleep became one of death.

Black Hills Ben paused.

"We shall soon leave the hills," he said to Bennington, "and, beyond, there is more Christian country. We shall find fewer rocks, and more trees and grass, but it is not a paradise. If a man goes at headlong speed there, he may fall into a prairie canyon and break his neck."

"No breakage fur me," said Walt. "My neck has been broke short off five times, an' tied up arterwards. It's so short now that my food tumbles right from my mouth inter my stomach jest like jumpin' from a precipice. Chaw, Injun?"

His tobacco was generously extended toward Windfoot, but the latter disdained to answer.

"I go to investigate," continued the scout, "but will return very soon."

He was gone ten minutes, and then, returning, led the way again. They emerged from the hills, and were on what looked at first sight like an unbroken plain. Dark objects of varied size were to be seen here and there, but they were trees, singly and in groups.

The horses were put to a quick pace, and two miles were soon covered. Then the scout used more caution. They were liable at any moment to happen upon the dangerous clefts in the surface before mentioned by him, and they were as dangerous as Indians and outlaws.

This caution saved them from one danger. Black Hills Ben suddenly paused again, and when the others came up, spoke in a low voice:

"My horse gives evidence that something is ahead, and, if I do not mistake the signs, it means other horses. If so, there are more Sioux or outlaws. Let me scout!"

He threw his bridle-rein to Walt, and glided away on foot. There was another period of suspense, and the general feeling of uneasiness was not abated when the scout brought back his report.

"Somebody's camp!" he briefly observed. "They can't be friends, so we will make a slight deviation and pass around them. Let there be no talking."

They advanced again and passed to the west of the camp. The latter was in a motte, while the fugitives were only screened by scattered trees. If a guard was posted they might be seen, but Ben had detected no such guard. Watching the grove sharply, they passed safely by and pressed on toward the north.

Another half-mile had been covered, and they were advancing along the side of a prairie canyon, when new signs of danger appeared. Horsemen were suddenly seen on the other bank. The latter party had been riding southward, and the two now came almost face to face, with a yawning gulf between them which was thirty yards wide.

Discovery was simultaneous, and the strangers at once halted. A voice floated across the barranca.

"Pilgrims, ahoy! Who goes there?"

"Men who don't tell their names," the scout quickly replied. "If you are under the same flag, you know why."

"I don't know why, but I want to!" was the retort. "I see you have a woman with you, and we are on the trail to find one of that sort—a runaway. Come here, and let me look at you!"

"If you know how to cross the chasm, do it yourself."

"We will. Do you stand there, and I'll divide my band. One-half will look for a place to cross; the others will stay here and keep you covered with their rifles. If you stir, you will be shot down."

"We can play at that game, too."

"Better not try it, for we are ten to your one. If you are from the valley, and have Blanche Beauvais prisoner, deliver her to me."

"There is no such person here."

"I'll believe you when I see. Don't dare to stir until we get to you."

A detachment of the other party at once started south, but Black Hills Ben had no intention of awaiting their arrival. The unknown speaker had shown his hand plainly, and it was clear that flight must be resumed. Blanche was trembling, but Walt assured her that she need not fear while he lived.

"We'll make a dash," announced the scout. "Very likely we shall be fired upon, but the darkness may save us. Now, together—go!"

Away dashed the fugitives, but they had not gone fifty feet before a hoarse yell from the

other side of the barranca announced that they were discovered. It is hardly necessary to say that they did not stop; instead, their horses were urged on with voice, and, in some cases, more emphatic means, and they went shooting away at headlong speed.

A chorus of angry yells arose from the enemy; their horses were wheeled and they raced along the other side of the chasm; and then a desultory firing was begun, which raised an ominous whistling near the fugitives, as the bullets cut the air, but did not at once do more damage.

Black Hills Ben was most reluctant to expose the females to this danger, but when he would have turned from his course, he found a second canyon on their left. They were hemmed in between the two, and could only go straight on.

The firing grew more rapid and dangerous. Nearly all the strangers were taking a hand at it, and the bullets flew all around the little party. They did not fire at all, reserving their bullets for a possible crisis. Whether one worse than the present would come seemed doubtful. There was a constant flashing beyond the canyon; a constant whistling of bullets near the human targets.

But the worst was yet to come.

Suddenly a third party of horsemen appeared. They were directly in front, and seemed to have risen by magic from the ground. Magicians or not, they were Sioux warriors; the fugitives saw this at a glance, and tried to pause. Too late! Both parties had been going at a gallop, and they came together with a shock audible some distance away.

Wild West Walt had tried to raise his rifle, but in vain. A horse of gigantic size plunged into him, and he was dashed helplessly from the saddle, his weapon flying from his hand.

He struck the ground with painful force, and so great was the impetus given his body, rolled over several times. He stretched out his hand to stop his progress, but touched only empty air. More than this, the ground seemed to give way beneath him, and, while rifle-reports, yells, war-whoops and groans mingled confusedly in his ears, he went shooting down through space.

All his thoughts had been of his friends, who, he knew, were engaged in a desperate fight against great odds—no doubt, a hopeless fight—but his attention was vividly drawn to himself by a realization of the terrible truth.

He had fallen into the canyon!

Like a flash he remembered what Black Hills Ben had said of their great depth; how he had declared that a fall down one meant sure death, and the veteran sent out both hands in a wild attempt to grasp a bush, or root, or stone.

Vain attempt!

He grasped only empty air, and still went shooting down the abyss. A flood of recollections swept over him. Darkest anticipation assailed him, but no cowardly fear was there: such was not Walt Wilkins's way.

Down! down! Would it never end?

"Yes, in death!" thought the veteran. "Good-by, old world!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE VALLEY PRISONERS.

FAR up in the Northwest country, in the land of the fierce Sioux, and yet removed from the heart of their chosen district, lay a valley which was a novelty even for that experiment ground of Nature. In itself it was only an oval depression of about eight acres, hemmed in on all sides by cliffs, but its surroundings were peculiar.

It lay in a bowl of the mountains—a depression within a depression—but the bowl contained hundreds of acres. Passing out of the bowl in a northwesterly direction, a traveler would face the land of the Sioux. Exit and entrance were there easy, as they were in an exactly opposite direction, but, except for these two points, the way was rough, broken and difficult.

North of the little valley was a lake which covered a space about double the area of the valley. This was fed by the mountains to the east of the bowl, in several small streams, and discharged its superfluous waters in a larger stream which, until it passed the high hills, flowed in a northerly course, ultimately becoming a tributary of the Yellowstone.

Curiously enough, this lake lay two hundred feet above the crest of the cliffs which hemmed in the valley, and three hundred above their base. Nature, however, had erected a wall of rock along the south side of the lake, thereby protecting the valley from a possible deluge.

Each of these places had received a distinguished name, and they had become known respectively as World's End Basin, Lake Desolation and Paradise Valley, while the whole was known by the general name of "World's End."

One afternoon, three days later than the scenes before recorded, a party of men was traversing the Basin, having entered at the southeast side, and moving toward Paradise Valley.

A more heterogeneous party it would be hard to find. There was to be seen the clear-blooded American; the quick, restless Frenchman; the swarthy, furtive Mexican; the half-breed; the full-blood Indian; and one lone negro. Possibly

a half-dozen other nations were represented among the men of white skins.

In the midst of this party were four persons who were prisoners. They were Blanche Beauvais, Claudia, Major Bennington and Long Dave Cobb. All sat their horses with an air of weariness, and the two men, being bound, were in actual suffering.

"We are nearly there," said Blanche, with a sigh.

"I should hope so," Long Dave devoutly replied. "I've rid a boss all over the West, from Panama ter the North Pole, an' I vow I never seen the like o' this afore. Cramped? Don't mention it. My backbone has shortened eleven inches sence we started, an' will never assume its old elasticity. My ribs hev all pricked through the cuticle, by Moses!"

"All this will soon end," said the major, affecting a cheerfulness he did not feel.

"Right you be," Long Dave agreed. "They can't go much further, unless they part comp'ny with me an' prick surroundin' air, the ribs can't."

"I allude to the end of our journey."

"My journey ain't ended. I'm bound ter live out my schedule period o' life. My gran'ther hung on ter terror infirmity—which is Latin, or Choctaw, I forgit which, fur 'firm land'—until he was a hundud an' nine years old. My father died at ninety-nine, an' I vow I won't be content with less than eighty-nine. That gives me forty-eight years afore my journey ends."

Nobody answered, and he soon resumed:

"I know it ain't right ter speak ill o' one's parients, but ef mine hed been wise, I'd been born forty year later. Miss Blanche, you may not believe it, but I'd give my last red ter be a babe, ter-day, 'leven months old, pooty ez a peach, an' kickin' up my heels. Ef thar's one thing I hanker ter do, it's ter kick up my heels. Ef I could do it now, I'd leave this present comp'ny, an' never stop kickin' until I was in Texas."

"Misfortune comes to all," remarked the philosophical major.

"K'rect, an' that's why I'm a-growlin'. Why couldn't I b'en exempt from the draft? I don't want no misfortune in mine. Yes, the darned creetur comes ter all, an' I say it's an outrageous shame. Somebody should hev been passed by, an' I'm that chicken. I'll eat my rifle ef—No, by Moses! can't do it! That rifle is gone ter chaos an' destruction."

"Here is the valley," Blanche announced.

The prisoners were ordered to dismount, and then they were led along a well-defined trail. Paradise Valley soon broke upon their view. It was a great relief, though it evidently labored under more name than it could properly carry. It was a paradise in no sense, except that the grass, and the occasional vines which hung from the cliffs, were pleasing to the eye.

These cliffs, which were a hundred feet high, were dark, perpendicular to a point of nicety, and singularly smooth. Armed men paced along their tops, observing what occurred below.

At the latter point a dozen canvas tents were visible, two of which were huge affairs. From these arose smoke, sparks of fire and some noise, and it was evident that the inhabitants of the valley were not drones.

The prisoners were led down a ladder of rock, the greater part of which was of man's hewing.

"Here we go," observed Long Dave, cheerfully. "Gaze on our new home! Exult, an' fill yer souls with honey an' the dew o' joy! Hear the clatter o' the gunmakin' industry—how it tickles the palate o' the ear! Major, ye may not b'lieve it, but next ter runnin', I banker ter be a gunmaker. I feel that I hev a callin' that way. I long ter shape the lock an' fresco the hammer. This sight fills my heart with irruptive bliss, but I'll be kicked ef I don't wish at times that I'd been born forty years later!"

The prisoners were conducted to the south end of the valley, near the tents.

"You know your old quarters, Miss Beauvais," said the leader of their captors, with a smile.

"I do, only too well," the girl answered, with a sigh.

"You can make yourself at home. I suppose the other prisoners will be interested, and if they want to stop work they can. The day is nearly gone."

"I shall go to my father," said Blanche, half-unconsciously.

"As you will. Now, you two men, you must go to work to-morrow."

"What hour, mister?" asked Long Dave.

"Seven o'clock."

"Can't you say six?"

"Your long tongue will run less nimbly, by and by," the outlaw replied, with a frown. "Now, I'll leave you. Hope there will be a happy reunion!"

He strode away, followed by his men. Blanche had flitted into one of the larger tents, but her companions remained where they were until the noise inside suddenly ceased and nearly a score of men came out hastily. They were the captive gunmakers of the valley.

If Major Bennington had ever doubted Blanche's words, he would have lost doubt then. After seeing the hybrid outlaws, these unwill-



ing toilers looked the personification of honesty, while over the faces was the shadow of trouble which cannot but follow captivity.

A large-framed, fine-looking man advanced to the major's side and extended his hand.

"Sir," said he, "this is a sorry meeting, and I can swear I am not glad to see you; but you are now among men who are not cut-throats, anyhow."

"I can well believe it, and since I must have companions in misfortune, I am glad they are honest men."

"There are women here, too—Heaven help them!"

"With Heaven's help, we will aid them."

"Ah! you don't know these men!"

"I know them all I want to."

Long Dave Cobb had been eying the former prisoners, and he now approached a young man who next to the spokesman, seemed the most athletic of the party, as well as manly and impressive in every way.

"Stranger," said Dave, "be you one o' them gunmaker chaps?"

"I have that honor!" was the ironical reply.

"Then let me whisper in your ear. I'm jst a-hankerin' ter git ter work; I long ter swing the sledge an' drive the hammer; I pant ter wield the crowbar an' osserate the derrick. Hence, kin you git up an hour ahead o' time, ter-morrer, an' give me lessons?"

"I will do so at once. Come to the tent!"

"Hol' on! hol' on!"

"Well?"

"Wait a bit; wait until my muscles relax. At present they're knotted up in coils like rattlers. I'm all shook out o' shape. I must hev ontill mornin' ter rest. Then you'll see meswing the tools o' trade."

"Stranger, do you see yonder man pacing the top of the ledge, rifle in hand?"

"Yes."

"And the one beyond him?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you also observe that a line of these men completely encircles the valley. I think you will work to-morrow. If you don't, one of those dogs will shoot you dead!"

The speaker folded his muscular arms over his broad chest and directed a glance upward which seemed to shoot indignant flashes at the outlaw guards. Long Dave's heart went out to this man; he recognized in him a dauntless spirit who would shrink from no peril, and such men were his ideals of true manliness.

"Stranger, what's yer name?"

"Hugh Somerville."

"Mine's Long Dave Cobb. I mention it incidental, so ef I should take homesick an' die on't, you'd know what name an' cryptograph ter put on my tombstone. Ontill I shuffle off this mortal coil, believe me yourn, truly. I like your style, by Moses!"

Somerville smiled faintly, but at that moment he was approached by Blanche with extended hand.

"Have you no welcome-home for me?" she asked, with an archness which seemed more than forced.

"Heaven knows I have no welcome-home, while your home—if the word will pass—is here. I wish you all happiness, mademoiselle, but it would lighten my own captivity if, instead of this, I knew you were safe in some border town."

"You were always kind to me," returned Blanche, her gaze falling.

"I were a brute, and blind, to be otherwise. Your eyes have played havoc with the stoicism I once thought mine. That's a plain speech, but I am miserable and reckless."

"You do not bear captivity well."

"No," answered Somerville, frowning; "I was never born for it. Yet I have done well enough until now; but when I see you again here—again a captive—my blood seems to boil, and I long to go up and throttle those scoundrels!"

He made a fierce gesture toward the outlaw guard.

"You are in a rebellious mood," Blanche declared. "Rebellious, and, I should say, a dangerous rebel."

"You don't mean to you?"

"Certainly not."

"I am glad of it, for I swear that I would shed the last drop of blood in my body for you. Again, I am frank; desperate men frequently are. Belle Blanche, I have two things to say to you."

"Let me hear them."

"First, I shall be the next person to escape from here. I don't care if a thousand guards pace the crest of the cliff; I was never created to stay here, live a slave, and make weapons wherewith these cut-throats, red and white, are to butcher men and women along the border. I will not stay!"

"Mr. Somerville, do nothing rash," nervously exclaimed the girl.

"Trust me to be as wise as lies in my nature; I realize the need of caution. Some skill ought to be used, too, for it will be no easy matter to pass those alert guards."

"You will be killed if you try," Blanche declared.

"Then it will be, exit Hugh Somerville. But I think that I shall succeed."

"And if you do?"

"I shall never rest until you are rescued."

"There are others here besides me."

"There is but one Blanche Beauvais. There! forgive me, and I will not offend again; the duration of our acquaintance does not justify such speech on my part. As I said before, my mood is reckless and rebellious just now; but I am your friend, mademoiselle."

"I am sure of it."

"Thank you."

"And what is the second thing you have to say to me?"

Somerville hesitated, and seemed ill at ease.

"On the whole, I will not say it," he replied.

"I hope you would not keep back what I ought to know."

"Assuredly not, but this concerns only my own views and interests, you see."

His manner was awkward, and, possibly, lacking in veracity, but Claudia furnished a welcome interruption by approaching just then. Basil Beauvais, Blanche's father, had offered the shelter of his tent to the Benningtons, and the chance had been gladly accepted. The girls would still be together, and they had become friends in captivity.

So entered the new prisoners into Paradise Valley and the life of its inmates, and while another night fell darkly over World's End Basin, Major Bennington talked with Beauvais and Garrison—the latter being the man who had first greeted them, the writer of the letter borne by Blanche, and the acknowledged head of the captive colony—but found little hope or consolation in the exchange of views.

In the mean while, Hugh Somerville, walking restlessly outside, looked often at the tent which sheltered Blanche, and thought:

"No; I will not tell her. Some miracle may avert the blow, and if it comes, she will know it all too soon."

#### CHAPTER VIII.

##### A VICTORY AT THE RIFLE'S MUZZLE.

THE little band which we followed in our opening chapter was broken up and assailed by misfortune, but those who were now at World's End, could tell but little of the other, and missing, members.

They did tell, each in a characteristic way, of the fatal encounter by the canyon; the desperate conflict when they fought against overwhelming numbers; and of their defeat and subsequent captivity; but in regard to three of their party there was doubt and uncertainty.

All were sure that Black Hills Ben had made good his escape. He was the last of the party to stand up against the Sioux, and the major referred to his fighting with glowing eyes and eloquent words; but when all the others were down, and he was left alone to fight two-score enemies, the scout had broken through the red warriors and escaped.

It was believed that Windfoot had been slain, and prostrated among the dead Sioux, while Long Dave Cobb had chanced to observe Wild West Walt's unlucky fall down the canyon. All save Dave agreed that this fall must have been instantaneously fatal, but Cobb insisted that the contrary was the case.

"That chap," he doggedly maintained, "has been in ev'ry sort o' danger fur forty years, an' ef he war ter die by voylance, he'd b'en dead a century ago. Depend on't, the old feller will show up all right. I'll bet he might fall off'm a cliff a thousand feet high, an' never git even a bruise."

This sanguine view was shared by no one else, and Walt Wilkins was thought of as one whose career on prairie and mountain was forever past.

The gunmakers resumed work the following morning, and Long Dave and the major were with them. Thomas Garrison was their foreman. There was one of the outlaws who was a practical workman, and he visited the valley when he saw fit—sometimes three visits were made in a day; sometimes he was absent for twenty-four hours. Nobody knew when he would see fit to come, and when he did, he minutely examined all they had done.

This fact, and the rifles of the outlaws, compelled the workmen to labor faithfully. They could not be dilatory, and to slight their work would have been folly. So they went on day after day, slaves in the full sense of the word, hoping for a favorable turn of the tide, but not expecting it.

The major had not forgot his army experience, and, though authority had never before been so irritating, he was determined to make the best of a bad matter.

Long Dave did not feel that way. Eager as he had professed to be, he went to work unwillingly, took things easy, and filled the tent with his lamentations. These, however, were as serio-comic as ever, and helped to keep up the spirits of his companions in misfortune.

The prisoners were now twenty-six in number, of whom six were women.

The forenoon passed uneventfully, but, two hours later, Basil Beauvais was called out of the tent. This troubled his companions not a little.

They saw that a party of their captors were in the valley, and they argued the worst from this fact.

Beauvais, on reaching the outer air, was met by Gregerson, the outlaw who had immediate charge of Paradise Valley, and informed that he was wanted in one of the small tents. He went, and found there a white man and a Sioux Indian. He did not remember seeing either before.

"This is the Frenchman," announced Gregerson, addressing the other white man.

"Sit down, Beauvais," directed the white stranger. "You may as well know me at once. I am a lieutenant of the Grand Chief, and my name is Judson Killough!"

It would have been a familiar name to Walt Wilkins, had he been there, vividly recalling the scene in the mountains when the creeping Sioux ceased creeping forever, but to Beauvais it conveyed no intelligence.

"This Indian," Killough resumed, "is Sweeping Eagle, a chief high in the regard of Sitting Bull."

A troubled expression appeared on the Frenchman's face.

"It don't take me long to make a point," pursued the outlaw lieutenant. "Sweeping Eagle's lodge is dark; you have a fair daughter!"

Beauvais's face became strangely pale.

"*Mon Dieu, monsieur!*" he cried, "don't strike me to the heart. Have mercy!"

"Now don't begin idle talk. Your daughter—her name, I think, is Blanche—goes to the chief's lodge. She must be ready in an hour. I see no reason why you, or she, should make a row over it, for Sweeping Eagle is a great chief; but you must remember that your girl ran away. She is dangerous; I won't have her here. She must become the wife of the Sioux."

"Pity me!" cried Beauvais, wildly. "I am a feeble old man, and my Blanche is all I have in the world. Look, monsieur, I am your slave; I labor here for you daily. Leave my girl to keep me company and I will work the flesh from my fingers. Don't take her away! In heaven's name, be merciful, or my heart will break and—"

"Rubbish!" interrupted Killough, contemptuously.

"Let me speak with the Frenchman," said Sweeping Eagle in very good English, yet with a curiously slow, labored manner. "Father of the white girl, why should you weep? The fairest maidens of the great Sioux nation would gladly go to Sweeping Eagle's lodge. He has power which even Sitting Bull respects, and his arm is a rod of terror in battle. When he goes on the war-path, his enemies cover their heads and tremble like beaten dogs; but to his squaw he will be as tender as the panther to its young. What prouder lot can be given Blanche?"

"You may mean well," tremulously answered the Frenchman, "but the girl will not be happy with one of your race—"

"When the great confederation falls upon the border, killing all who are its enemies, how will the girl be safest—with a white lover, or a Sioux husband?"

Sweeping Eagle's voice had grown sharp, and his eyes began to glitter ominously.

"My poor Blanche can die, if need be," Beauvais brokenly replied, "but let it be in my arms rather than of a broken heart among your race."

"What right have you to govern her actions?" the chief demanded. "Sweeping Eagle's mind is even clearer than his eyes. He knows, if others do not, that the girl is no daughter of yours; that no part of your blood flows in her veins!"

The Frenchman had grown freshly agitated, and his tongue refused to do his bidding when he would have spoken.

"Dare you deny it?" the Indian continued.

"I do deny it. What you say is false. Blanche is my child—my cherished daughter. Oh! take her not—"

"You lie with the readiness of the white man," was the stern interruption. "Has the Frenchman's brain grown weak? Does he think the Indian lies as he would lie? Know, man with the perjured tongue, that even a Sioux may have known what once took place at Prairie Port!"

Beauvais seemed to grow paler, and his head drooped.

"Dare you longer deny my words?" the chief demanded.

"At least she is the child of my heart," replied the unhappy prisoner.

"That settles it!" exclaimed Killough, who had been growing restless. "You practically admit that she is not your daughter, so, of course, you have no claim to her. Such being the case, we will dispense with further idle talk. Come, chief, I'll summon your fair bird, and we'll leave the valley as soon as possible."

"Monsieur," cried the Frenchman, wildly, "I beg that you will have mercy. My poor child will die of a broken heart among those wild Indians, and I—I had rather die than live without her!"

His manner was pitiful in the extreme, but Killough made a quick, disdainful gesture.

"Enough of this!" he said, angrily. "I won't



listen to womanish pleading and wailing. The girl has got to go, and that's the end of it. Now say no more."

He turned to leave the tent, but Beauvais, half-frantic, caught his arm. Killough fiercely flung him aside, and partially drew a revolver. Looking at the prisoner with glittering eyes, he hoarsely added:

"Molest me further, and I'll shoot you like a dog. I swear it by all the saints!"

His manner awed Beauvais for a moment, and Killough and the Indian went out.

"*Mon Dieu!*" moaned the unhappy father, "what can I do? Better for Blanche that she should die than go there, but I am weak—helpless—unable to save her! But there are the gunmakers; they all love my child. I will appeal to them!"

He rushed back to the largest tent and gave the alarm, and every implement at once became idle. The men had borne captivity, but their powers of endurance were put to a severe test when one of their women was to be handed over to the fierce barbarian Sioux.

Killough had made known his errand, and started a great excitement among the women, when he perceived the gunmakers hastening toward them in a body, led by Hugh Somerville, and armed with hammers, bars of iron, and whatever they could find in the way of weapons. The outlaw lieutenant smiled coldly and looked at his men. There they stood, forty in number, and all armed to the teeth. There was no reason to fear the wretched slaves who had not a firearm to their name. They might bark, but they could not bite.

The outlaw felt so much at least that he allowed his gaze to wander to Claudia Bennington's face. He had often looked that way since he saw her first, five minutes before, and had she been the woman intended for Sweeping Eagle, the decree might have been reversed.

In brief, all the boasted impregnability of the man had not been sufficient to prevent his being deeply moved to admiration by Claudia's queenly beauty.

The moment when he first saw her was an evil, unfortunate one in her life.

The gunmakers came marching up in a body, their faces grim and resolute, though many were far from calm. Somerville had unconsciously gone to the front, and his strong hand grasped a hammer tightly, but he willingly allowed Thomas Garrison the lead in speech.

"Well," said Killough, sharply, "may I ask why in blazes you have left your work?"

"Sir," Garrison deeply replied, "we are here as petitioners—supplicants."

"Well?"

"Beauvais states that you are going to take his daughter, Blanche, away—"

"I am going to take her away!" was the curt reply.

"We beg that you will not do it. Have mercy on the girl, who cannot endure a life like that to which you would send her—"

"That is not my affair."

"Surely, you are not without mercy—"

"I am!" was the grim reply. "Now, men, have done with this nonsense. I cannot—will not—hear you. Am I to be dictated to by my prisoners? Not by a good deal! The girl goes with Sweeping Eagle to the land of the Sioux!"

Blanche grew as white as a lily, while Somerville handled his hammer nervously. He restrained himself from speaking only with an effort, and then and there marked Judson Killough down as a man with whom he would some day have a decisive settlement.

"You forget," said Garrison, with uncontrollable indignation, "that it is in our power to refuse to do any work, if this outrage is persisted in."

"So you contemplate a 'strike'? Believe me, I can play at that game, too. The girl leaves us, and if, after that, you refuse to work, I will torture you until you yield!"

His expression was that of a demon, and Blanche shivered perceptibly.

"Kind friends," she faintly said, "you can do me no good. Do not try. I must go anyway; it is better that I go quietly. I will go, placing my trust in One who is stronger than this man."

Basil Beauvais broke out in loud cries, but Killough wasted no more time. At a motion from him his men advanced a few paces, raised the hammers of their rifles and stood with the muzzles of the weapons well advanced.

"Now, Sweeping Eagle," the lieutenant directed, "take your squaw. We can tarry here no longer."

The Sioux advanced toward Blanche. Somerville breathed so laboriously that his chest rose and fell convulsively; Beauvais sobbed like a child; and the whole company of gunmakers seemed wrapped in a nightmare of despair. It was a scene more dramatic than any which had ever before occurred in the valley.

Blanche was pale and trembling, but she tried to bear up bravely. She had not forgotten that Black Hills Ben still lived; nor that Wild West Walt might possibly have survived the fall from the rocks. In any case, a fight would bring untold misfortunes upon her friends, and do her no good.

"Come, Velvet Eyes," said the Indian in his gentlest voice. "Do not shrink from the Sweeping Eagle, for his heart can be soft as a woman's. His lodge is dark, but the face of Velvet Eyes will light it, and he will live in her smile. Come, and you shall see how gentle a warrior can be."

Blanche sighed, and then moved on a step with him.

Suddenly, however, Hugh Somerville sprang forward and flung the Sioux aside violently.

"It shall not be!" he cried. "Slaves may have no rights, but, by my life, we will not be made to toil for you and then see our women handed over to red cut-throats. You shall not take the girl except over my dead body!"

It was a brave defiance, and he looked like a Hercules as he stood there with the hammer upraised in his strong hand, but Killough only smiled coldly.

"So you are anxious to die, youngster?"

"I am ready to dare all in defense of a helpless woman."

"Fool!"

"Call me what you will; I am not a butcher."

"I am!" coldly, sneeringly replied the outlaw.

"Butchery is my trade, and I will prove it, if you insist. Go back to your work!"

"Not until you promise to spare this girl."

Killough pointed toward the tent, and spoke one word in a voice which would have frightened many a brave man then:

"Go!"

"I will, when you have promised. Man, are you mortal? Are you utterly pitiless? Is it not enough that we are slaves? At least, spare these helpless women. If you want faithful service from us, you can gain it in no surer way than by being merciful. Spare this girl!"

"Your way is not my way; I rely on the rifles of my followers, and I know their power. I rule or ruin. For the last time, will you go?"

"No!"

Killough made a motion. Six men advanced and presented their rifles to Somerville's breast. The hammers were still up, and the intervening distance was less than two feet.

"If this fool lifts a finger in resistance," said Killough, in a slow, inexorable voice, "shoot him to the heart. Chief, take the girl!"

The blood surged to Somerville's face in a dark red torrent; his chest heaved; his strong limbs quivered; and he looked at the men with the rifles as though he would gladly tear them to pieces. But he was helpless; mad, indeed, would be the man who would defy the powers which were against him.

His gaze turned toward Blanche. Sweeping Eagle had held out his hand, but she declined it with a gesture and walked by his side toward the valley exit, far calmer than was to be expected.

Then Somerville's gaze flashed back to Killough, an unnatural smile moved his lips, and he said in a deep voice:

"I will not forget this day's work, sir!"

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### SOMERVILLE BECOMES A TARGET.

KILLOUGH showed by a glance that he heard the significant speech, but gave it no other notice. He kept his position grimly while Blanche, Sweeping Eagle and the five men crossed the valley, and then, when the cliff was reached, withdrew with the rest of his men.

The prisoners maintained complete silence, but watched Blanche constantly. At the rock-ladder they saw her again decline the chief's aid; then she went up with firm steps. At the top she turned and waved farewell to her friends; then she disappeared from their view.

The monotony of Beauvais's pitiful sobs was broken by the voice of Long Dave Cobb.

"It's a diabolical piece of devilry!" he declared, angrily, "but if it don't recoil on them, I'm a bow-legged liar with a forked tongue. I'll give any man a dollar ter ketch me by the collar an' sling me ter the top o' that villainous cliff. Oh! ef I's on the trail, with a good gun, I'll sw'ar that the painted heathen never'd see Sioux-burg ag'in. I'd shoot him so full o' lead that you couldn't tell whether he's an Injun, or a new-fangled sort o' cannon!"

His indignant remarks served to dispel the trance-like mood of the captives; every tongue became unloosened; and with a confused exchange of views, they turned to go back to the tents.

Suddenly Beauvais sprang to his feet.

"Why didn't I think of it before?" he cried.

"Think of what, man?" Garrison asked.

"That chief! He is no Indian, I'll swear, but a hundred times worse. Who, but he, could know about Blanche? Oh, *Mon Dieu!* the shadows of the past roll darkly over me, and Blanche is lost—lost!"

They inquired what he meant, but his speech was broken and confused, and Claudia and the major took him to his tent. He seemed wholly unnerved.

Work was not resumed by the gunmakers. They were in a rebellious mood, and inclined to defy the armed guards on the cliff. For once, their idleness was tolerated, perhaps Judson Killough had yielded a point.

Another night fell. The captives had never

before been so gloomy; all had loved Blanche, and her fate, terrible as it was, seemed only the first of other blows of the kind. Major Bennington looked at Claudia, and his lips moved in prayer. He had noticed that Killough often looked at the girl, and he had well read those admiring, lawless glances.

He knew not how soon the next blow might come.

Claudia did not turn her own thought so much in this direction as on Blanche's case, and her own present captivity. She was not progressing at all in the work which called her to Siouxland. Back in the East her lover waited with the gallows menacing him, and her search for Dunstan Hughes had come to a full stop.

She already had food enough for thought.

Hugh Somerville did not join the others during the evening, but they did not wonder at it. The day had shown them that he loved Blanche Beauvais, and it was not strange that he should seek solitude at this time.

If they had known all, they would not have regarded the matter so lightly.

After leaving them Somerville had done two things worthy of mention. He first secured a lasso, coiled it, and hung it over his shoulder. Next he went to the large tent and secured a hammer. This work he seemed somewhat particular about, and balanced it several times in his hand experimentally.

"It will do!" he finally said.

Then he went out, walked toward the eastern cliff and stood gazing up thoughtfully. One of the guards was just ahead of him, his form showing darkly against the sky as he paced to and fro.

"It shall be done," muttered Somerville.

"Victory or death comes to me to-night!"

He waited some time longer, and then walked to the base of the cliff. Once there he looked upward long and earnestly, as though to discover some particular object. Then he stepped back and arranged the lasso for a cast.

The noose shot upward.

Somerville had had two years experience in Texas, and was unusually skillful with a lasso, but he had not expected the success which attended his effort. The noose caught and held fast at the first trial.

"Is it an omen of good luck?" he muttered.

"Nonsense! I am growing childish. Let me leave omens to those who are in their dotage."

He grasped the lasso and began to ascend steadily, bracing his feet somewhat against the cliff. His muscular arms were now tested, but not found wanting. He reached the place where the lasso hung from a point of rock, and, gaining partial foothold, rested a few moments. Then he made another cast. This time his every movement put him in danger of a fall, making great caution necessary, and he did not succeed until the attempt had been eight times repeated.

When the noose caught he repeated his climb upward.

There he found ample room to rest—a grateful chance, just then, for his arms felt the strain. Above him was a slight fissure in the cliff, and it was probable that he would need the lasso no more.

For days he had been planning this effort. He had marked the fissure—almost the only one to be seen—and the points of rock. Only a strong, brave man, and one skillful in the use of a lasso, would have had faith to attempt the work, but he had done it.

As far as the ascent was concerned, the worst was over, too, but when the top was reached the outlaw picket would be there.

All this he had calculated before, and, after a brief rest, he continued his course. Climbing, though still difficult, was not as bad as before. Using great care to prevent dislodging loose pieces of rock, he went steadily up the fissure. He reached the top. Taking a cautious survey, he saw the guard pacing his post.

Somerville prepared for the encounter. Gaining a favorable position, he crouched down and waited. It was impossible to pass the post unseen; the meeting must come; and he relied on the surprise to offset the arms of the outlaw. Nearer came the latter, unsuspecting of danger.

With a tiger-like leap Somerville sprang upon him. The shock was resistless; the guard was dashed to the ground, and his assailant fell heavily upon him. One of his hands grasped the outlaw's throat, and the other searched for the hammer.

The man must be silenced; if he succeeded in giving an alarm, all was lost. More than this, the work must be quickly done, for the other guards were liable at any moment to see that something was wrong.

The hammer arose and fell, and the outlaw gave a great start, and then lay passive in Somerville's grasp. The deed was done, but, at any moment, the alarm might be sounded by other lips. Somerville hastily secured the fallen man's weapons and crept away. This pace he increased to a run as soon as he dared, and with all possible speed left the valley behind.

Suddenly the crack of a rifle sounded, but he did not look back. He knew from whence it came; he knew its purport. The insensible guard had been found.



"Now it's a run!" he exclaimed, aloud. "There will be a hot pursuit, and it will be one man against some hundreds; but I am well-armed, and the Northwest is before me. We will see what I can do."

He had reached a broad canyon, and he took to its level bed and ran on nimbly. He saw with some concern that the moon was coming out from its curtain of cloud, and that its light would fall in the canyon, but if he did not run upon any one, it would aid his flight.

A mile had been placed between him and Paradise Valley, and he was gaining hope, when new danger menaced him with startling abruptness. Passing a narrow point of the canyon, he saw a deep recess at the right. In this alcove blazed a fire, with several men around it. He was not conscious that he had made any noise, but he was at once seen—possibly the rifle-shot had put them on the alert.

"Halt! Who goes there?" demanded a hoarse voice.

Somerville did not answer; he had only one course before him, and that was flight. He leaped away like a greyhound. Renewed cries arose from the camp.

"Shoot the scoundrel!" cried the former speaker.

The cliffs rung with several combined reports, and as many bullets whistled past the fugitive, but he remained unharmed. He strained every nerve, and did creditable work, but, looking over his shoulder, saw the men in pursuit.

"I'm in for it," he muttered, grimly.

Just then the full moon sailed out from behind every vestige of cloud, and the canyon became almost as light as day. Two more shots were fired, and a bullet perceptibly grazed his shoulder. The pursuers were in no trifling mood, and he realized that his hold on things earthly was not of the strongest.

They could not fire many times in that light without hitting the target.

Somerville handled his own rifle nervously. He was tempted to fire, but every foot of vantage ground was precious to him then. He refrained, and exerted himself to the utmost to increase his lead. Down through the canyon he sped, but without perceptible gain. Worse than all, his limbs, unused to such exercise since he became a prisoner, began to weaken. He felt his powers of endurance failing, while the outlaws came on as rapidly as ever.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE GRASP OF AN UNSEEN HAND.

SOMERVILLE saw his danger, but his courage did not fail him in this, his hour of need. There were but six of the outlaws, and if the worst came he hoped to make matters lively for them. He had a rifle and two revolvers, and these, in the hands of a brave and experienced man, meant a good deal, provided that the enemy did not also shoot accurately.

The canyon made a sudden bend, and the fugitive hailed the change with joy. Once more he would be in darkness, and strategy might take the place of speed. But as he turned the bend he saw that, at this point, the walls of the passage were low and sloping.

His decision was at once made; he rushed toward the northern side and began to ascend with reckless haste. In the dim light he was by no means sure of his footing, but he leaped from rock to rock as though he was as sure-footed as a mountain sheep.

Luck favored him, and he made good progress but the pursuers suddenly appeared.

"Whar is he?" cried one.

"Gone on, o' course," replied another.

"Don't believe it. He was about run down, and I'll wager my rifle he's in hidin'. Burns an' Tucker, go on. The rest of you, beat up the rocks!"

Somerville had paused intending to act secretly, but a stone suddenly went rattling down the ascent.

"Thar he is!"

"Shoot the critter!"

A revolver was discharged, and a bullet flattened itself on the rock near the fugitive's head.

Secrecy was no longer to be thought of, and he renewed his efforts with headlong haste. Leaping from rock to rock, as before, he neared the top, but a regular fusillade was going on in the canyon. Only the darkness saved him, and as it was, there was a constant patter around him. His life was strangely preserved, but this could not last forever.

He was almost at the top when a perpendicular rock confronted him. He reached up, grasped the edge, and made a desperate effort to raise himself, but his hold was but a poor one. The chances were not in his favor, and he could hear the pursuers toiling up the acclivity behind him.

Suddenly something touched his neck; his garments were seized and tightened at the throat; there was a tension which brought a stoppage of breath with it; and he was raised as though by a Titan hand and landed on the level above.

"Great snakes!" exclaimed a voice beside him, "I should say that, in the course o' natur', I've ketched a big fish!"

Somerville gained a kneeling position, and looked keenly at the speaker. Titanic though

the grasp of the unseen hand had been, its possessor was a man very much like himself.

"Don't glare at me so fierce," added the unknown, "or you'll meet the blade o' my skulpin'-knife. I'm no noxious outlaw, an' ef you ain't, mebbe we kin hitch hosses an' lick them other chaps. They'll git wal trounced ef Old Walt Wilkins sets to!"

"Are you Walt Wilkins?" cried Somerville.

"I be, but who be—"

"Then fall to, and let us fight for Blanche."

"Fur Blanche? Be you her friend?"

"I am."

"Then you're mine, too. Blaze away at them critters! Her friend? Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

The ranger cast himself down and thrust out his long arm.

"Git out, you venomous creetur's. Scoot! Run! Skip! Clar the track, or you're gone coons. I'm goin' ter shoot! Be you goin'? It's the last call!"

But the outlaws continued to climb; clinging to boulder and ledge they rushed upward; they were almost at the top. Somerville had dropped down beside his new friend.

"They will have it!" he said. "Fire!"

Better targets were never offered; even the shadows of the canyon did not hide the climbing men; and at that distance it was almost impossible to miss. These men who fired were adepts with the revolver, and with the utmost coolness they dispatched shot after shot. In a very brief time every one of the outlaws was on the way down the rocks, and it was hard to tell the living from the stricken, so headlong was the flight of the former.

"Easy whipped, by hickory!" exclaimed the ranger.

"Yes, but we must get away from here in hot haste. Others of the gang are near, and we shall get no mercy at their hands if they find us."

"Don't want any," returned Walt, quietly. "I'm a stubborn man in my way, an' I won't accept a favor from a skulkin' white outlaw. I approve o' yer idee o' makin' tracks, how'sever, an' would advise leavin' 'em a good bit o' distance apart."

Both men were by this time hurrying away.

"I don't know where to go," confessed Somerville.

"I do. Foller my lead, an' I'll escort ye ter a safe nook whar we kin hide."

"But I am in haste to get away. I have escaped from the secret valley—Blanche told you of it—and I propose to make good my escape and bring help. Blanche has been taken away by an Indian chief, who dares presume to take her to his lodge, and I will rescue her or die."

"Traps an' tomahawks! the Princess ain't in that fix, is she?" demanded Wilkins, stopping short.

"Yes."

"Rescue her? Wal, ef we don't, then I'll git trounced so bad that I can't stay on my pegs. Tell me erbout it—but, no; wait until we git ter kiver."

The tall ranger seemed to develop new and phenomenal pedestrian qualities, and Somerville had some difficulty in keep beside him. Finally, however Walt paused in a recess among the rocks, half a mile from the scene of the late fight.

"Set down an' rest ef you can," he said. "I can't. I'm in miser'ble condition; I'm all harassed up an' knocked ter pieces, I be; an' all on a'count o' what you've told about the Princess. Carried away ter the lodge o' a 'tarnal Sioux! In the course o' nature, jedgment day ain't fur off fur that copper-skin. But tell me all about it."

Somerville told the story with a hard voice, compressed brows and glittering eyes. The recital brought back that scene in Paradise Valley, when Blanche was taken away by the power of the outlaws' rifles, and he seemed to live that painful hour over again. He finished by declaring his intention to at once hasten south and organize a rescue party.

"Wrong, comrade, wrong," replied Walt. "I wouldn't give a brass medal fur yer party. Even ef they's all borderers o' good stannin', they'd be useless; too many cooks spoil the broth, ye know. We've got party enough right hyar."

"Do you mean—"

"You an' me is ernough."

"Walt Wilkins, will you join hands with me in this matter?" the young man eagerly asked.

"Great snakes, yes! Do ye s'pose I could rest while the Princess was in the clutches o' them critters? I'd die o' starvation fur loss o' sleep ef I deserted her. Comrade, our duty is clear; we must j'ine hands, strike a bee-line fur Sioux-land proper, an' rescue that charmin' piece o' femininity ef we spill gallons o' our own blood doin' it!"

Walt spoke with emphasis, and Somerville warmly grasped his hand.

"Mr. Wilkins, words can't express my gratitude, but I tell you this makes me happy! I am scarcely a veteran borderer, though I've had some years' experience in the West, but I feel that with your help wonders can be accomplished."

"Ef by that you mean trouncin' them red

varmints, you kin rest assured on that. It comes nat'ral ter me ter massacre red-skins, an' I once slew a hull tribe in one day. I oughtn't ter brag, though; 'tain't modest, an' thar was only one Injun in the tribe. I hev an idee thar is about twenty millions o' the Sioux, but by stiddy work we can wind 'em up in a fortnight. Some may git away, but they'll be mortally deperlated."

"Thanks, friend—a thousand thanks. When do we start?"

"Immediate. Thar'll be whoopin's an' hol-lerin's when them varmints find ye're gone, an' ev'ry rod we gain afore the fun begins, the better. Come on!"

"I have only a vague idea of the course we ought to take."

"The red-skin set off fur his lodge arter gittin' her, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then leave the rest ter me," Walt confidently replied. "I know a bit erbout Sioux-land, fur I've been over it as white an' red, man an' squaw—fact, by sixty, though you may not believe it."

"I suppose you mean you were disguised as a squaw."

"You've hit it, fu'st try; an' I made a bewitchin' squaw, too. None o' the bucks popped the question ter me, but it was due ter my over-powerin' charms an' their natural timidity."

By this time the two men were moving carefully northward. Their course was one of extreme peril. They were compelled to pass the gunmakers' valley in order to reach the Sioux trail, and though they did not intend to go very near it, neither knew where the outlaws themselves were camped, and a collision was possible at any moment. Besides this, Somerville's escape had undoubtedly been discovered, and searching parties might at any time be met.

In this emergency Wild West Walt's powers came to the surface decisively. Somerville, who had seen some little experience on the border, was filled with admiration as they went on; the guide's caution and judgment were apparent in everything he did, yet it was done without the least demonstration.

If Walt was given to a good deal of unimportant talk when no danger existed, he was quiet, brave and modest when peril hovered near.

At his request conversation was discontinued for a time, and though Somerville wondered how the veteran had escaped death when he fell into the canyon, he had to wait for an explanation.

They went on where the scenery, though gloomy in its lack of vegetation, was grand and awe-inspiring. The piled-up rocks lay boulder upon boulder, or reared their lofty heads in cliffs which seemed aspiring to reach the dim, frowning sky above. The adventurers, however, gave no thought to these wonders.

Always keeping in the darkest shadows of the canyons, they went on with their thoughts directed in one direction only; their sole object being to avoid the outlaws.

This they were not destined to do entirely. They were in the most perilous part of their journey when Walt suddenly paused, grasped Somerville's arm and drew him back closer to the cliff. At the same moment several men became visible a few feet ahead, but steadily advancing toward the borderers.

## CHAPTER XI.

### DANGEROUS COMPANIONS.

CONVERSATION was going on among the strangers, and their words were plainly heard by the men in the recess.

"I pity you, Gregerson, if the fellow is not recaptured," said one.

"Why should you?" was the irritable reply.

"Killough will rage like a tiger when he hears that one of the gunmakers has escaped."

"Killough is not the League."

"He comes blessed near it; I know of no other person who stands so well with the Grand Chief."

"Well, the guard is to blame, if any one. I can't patrol the cliff; it's not my business."

"I'll wager something that Killough puts the blame on your shoulders, just the same."

The party had not paused, and their voices now became indistinct as they receded. They had not suspected that the man they sought was so near at hand, but he had good evidence that they were after him. They were, however, moving in entirely the wrong direction, and Somerville at once saw the possibility that he would escape attention when once out of World's End.

It might not occur to the outlaws that he would go toward Sitting Bull's district.

"One o' them chaps I know," said Walt. "See'd him among the hills one day when he was talkin' with that same Killough he mentions; his name is Starbuck. But who is 'Gregerson,' an' what d'ye know o' Killough, anyhow?"

"Gregerson has charge of Paradise Valley. Killough is one of the leaders of the conspiracy, and a dangerous man. He has much power, and uses it remorselessly. It was due to him that Blanche was taken away by the Indian chief, Sweeping Eagle."



"Mark one down fur Mister Killough. Ef he was the mean creetur' that took the Princess away, he an' I may hev a fallin' out some day. A man who'd d'liver a white gal over ter them red heathen oughter be trounced like sixty, an' I should enjoy doin' it. Ef I meet Killough, we may hev an int'restin' dispute."

"I only ask one chance at him," said Somerville, in a deep voice.

"Somebody orter take a 'chance' at all the leaders o' the gang, afore they let themselves loose. But we ain't got the time now, an' the fewer o' the gang we see, the better we'll like the view."

Contrary to their expectation the remainder of their journey through World's End Basin was uneventful. They saw no one by the way, and quiet reigned all around. It seemed almost impossible that a determined search was being made for Somerville, but they were satisfied to have it so.

Somerville left the precautions of the trip almost wholly to Walt, and was in deep thought much of the time. He thought of Blanche, her danger, the odds they must meet and the prospects of rescue; of the gunmakers in the valley and their manifold perils; of Claudia Bennington, her object in visiting Sioux-land and the small hope that she would succeed; and then, after all, his thoughts returned persistently to Blanche.

She was always foremost in his mind.

The northwestern limit of the Basin was finally reached, and the settlement of an important question drew near. They had no horses, but it was obvious that they could not go to the Sioux village on foot. It was clear to their minds, however, that the outlaws' horses were near the trail; the character of the vicinity showed this—as in that direction the best grazing was to be found—and remarks overheard in the past by Somerville indicated as much.

Once clear of the valley Walt's vigilance seemed to increase; he now not only wished to avoid the enemy, but horses must be had.

"I'd give half o' my inheritance ter find my hoss, Pansy," observed Walt. "I reckon she's pinin' in captivity som'ers, an' it must be tough on the gal. She ain't no common hoss, you understand, but one o' real genius an' ladylike qualities. In the course o' natur', she an' me will both be demoralized until we git tergether ag'in, but ef I go within a mile o' her, she'll be sure ter smell me. That hoss has got a powerful smeller!"

"So I've heard; but you have not yet told me how you escaped the night of the fight. You were reported to be crushed to death by a fall down the canyon."

"I was, Young man, it's only my ghost ye see a-trottin' along aside ye."

"Rather a substantial-looking ghost, I should say."

"Mebbe so, in out'ard appearance, but thar is only a shadder left on me; 'tain't substantial, by a good bit. But as fur my adventur', it wa'n't anything perty' excitin'. I toppled off the level inter the kenyon, an' I admit that the trip down wa'n't agree'ble; travelin' through the air never is, when ye know the 'airth is bound ter rise up an' bump ye, sooner or later. In this case I fell erbout nine hundred feet, an' hit in the top o' a pine tree. That was the last I knowed fur some hours."

"The collision stunned you."

"'Twasn't so much the collusion as the 'ree-top," Walt practically replied; "but the tree saved my life, nevertheless. Only fur that, I'd been buzzard-food fur sure. When I come ter my senses I was in a bad way, an' I'd made my will ter onc't, only fur two things; I hadn't no pen nur paper, an' nothin' ter will away but my rifle an' hoss, an' I ain't sure my heir could 'a' found the hoss. I ain't did so yit. Ter make a long story short, I dranked water freely as medicine—thar was a stream, an' plenty o' vegetation in the kenyon—an' finally rekindled my health an' come this way, as you see."

"You did not see Black Hills Ben, or Wind-foot, the Pawnee?"

"No."

"They were not captured. Whether they still live is not known to the captives."

"You kin depend on't that Ben Todd is alive; he ain't one o' the kind that kills easy. Mebbe I kin say the same o' the Pawnee, but the critter ain't sure. He won't chaw terbacker, an' a man who don't, is nat'rally del'kit."

Walt suddenly paused and looked steadfastly toward the right. Somerville imitated him, but could neither see nor hear anything. The darkness at this point was not as intense as in the Basin, for, being on elevated land, there was less shadow, but the mountain was still wild and broken.

"What is it?" the gunmaker asked.

"Nothin' o' importance, but ef you don't object, you may stay hyar while I go ter walk. I'm sorter romantic, an' like night promemaids, though thar ain't a blessed maid hyar. Wait fur me hyar."

So saying, the ranger stooped lower and glided away, giving Somerville no chance to reply. The latter did not like the arrangement, but yielded and remained quiet. Yet he was positive that Walt had seen or heard something un-

usual. What was it? Somerville had no means of knowing, but he drew back the hammer of his rifle and waited with every sense on the alert.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes passed, and then the profound silence was suddenly broken. He heard a sound, regularly repeated, and it drew nearer.

"Horses!" he muttered, and looked eagerly toward the point where they must appear.

They did appear, and he saw that they were two in number, with Wild West Walt upon the back of one.

"Hyar we be," said the veteran quietly.

"Reckoned I could raise a hoof ef I tried fur it. Jump up, comrade! You'll find right good hoss-flesh under ye, though nothin' like what Pansy was. The loss o' that hoss made me melancholy, by sixty! Ef I ever find any miser'ble thief straddle on her, I'll trounce his hide off, ef he's as big as a hoss himself. I'm like an orphan whose parients are dead 'thout Pansy, an' in the course o' natur' she feels as bad as I do."

While he was speaking Somerville had mounted and they were pursuing their former course. A proper degree of caution was observed. Walt had secured the horses from the outlaw corral not far away, and though there was no evidence that the enemy were on the alert, it was well to take due precautions.

All went well, however; no outlaws appeared to oppose their progress; the silence of Nature seemed unbroken except by their own movements; and they steadily left World's End behind them and drew nearer the Sioux village. After awhile, too, they were able to increase their pace to a degree more in keeping with Somerville's impatience.

The calm and easy composure of his companion was an excellent check to this impatience. Walt was never otherwise than calm, and he talked as lightly in time of danger as when all was peaceful—except when serious talk was necessary. Then he became the resolute borderer in a moment.

Somerville knew him well by reputation, confided in him accordingly, and was satisfied to let him take the lead in all things.

Daybreak found them still on their way, and Walt's claim that he knew the route well was confirmed by the discovery of a trail which, he ventured to say, was that of the party with whom Blanche had gone as a prisoner.

A brief halt was made by a stream where there was abundant grazing for the horses; the men made their breakfast of food carried by Walt; and then they again pressed on toward Sioux-land.

Neither underestimated the danger they were daring. Once near the Indian village they would be like a grain of sand on the seashore; and the least slip of theirs would probably send them to the stake. Their strength would avail nothing against the multitude of red-men; they must depend upon Walt's craft to evade the Sioux, and rescue Blanche.

After that, what?

Retreat would then be in order, but it would be a flight with hundreds of Indians in pursuit. Look at it as they might, theirs was a desperate venture. If they had been blind enough to doubt it, the truth would have been brought home to them before the day ended.

It was nearly noon and they were riding through a ravine. They reached a point where a second gulch joined the first at right angles; and as they did so, out from the second way rode twenty men. They were not Indians; they had skins as white as the two adventurers; but in every line of their rough, scarred, lawless-looking faces was revealed the white man whose moral nature is worse than that of an Indian.

Both Walt and Somerville promptly marked them down as members of the outlaw League, but the ranger, at least, gave no sign of mental disturbance. The sandy bottom of the gulch had deadened all sound of their approach, defying even his acute hearing, but his wits were as ready as ever now that he had a chance to use them.

He knew they had met just the men they wished to avoid; that it was utterly hopeless to fight against such odds; that the only result of flight would be to be riddled by bullets before they had gone thirty yards; and his unflinching perspicacity showed him the only available course of action.

He nodded coolly to the foremost outlaw.

"Mornin', pardner!" he said, quietly.

"Good-morning. Where do you ride?"

"Jest at present, only arter game."

"Are you from the valley?"

"Not lately."

"You say you are not on important business?"

"That was the drift o' my ree-mark."

Walt was outwardly very frank, for the manner of the questioner told that he was not suspicious. He believed that he had met more of his own followers. Clearly, it was to the ranger's interest to encourage this belief, and not anger the man, or arouse any doubts.

"I am glad of that," was the reply, "for I want you. I am on an expedition and want more men; and I have orders to attach to my party the first half-dozen I meet. You and your partner are lusty-looking fellows—just the men

I want. My name is Jake Jaffrin, and I am a sergeant; you've heard of me."

Now all this was far from being good tidings to Walt and Somerville, but the veteran answered promptly, his voice being as even and contented as possible.

"Sartain I've heerd o' you, an' we're at yer service. Say the word. Any fun ahead? Ef thar's goin' ter be a dispute, you kin rely on me ter trounce a few o' the inemy."

"You shall know the nature of our errand later. For the present we will camp at the spring yonder, and devour the game we took in lately. Tumble off your horses, lads, and get to work!"

Jaffrin's order was obeyed, and no one showed more readiness than the new recruits, but Somerville managed to get near Walt, and speak to him in a subdued voice.

"I comprehend your motives and approve your decision," he said, "but are we not getting into a close corner?"

"Slightly, lad, slightly; but we'll pull through; I always pull through."

"It would be strange if some of these men did not recognize me as one of the prisoners of Paradise Valley."

"That would be bad, but thar's no help fur it; we must face the music, ef the band don't play in tune. Take yer cue from me, an' ef the chance occurs, be ready ter cut an' run like chain-lightnin' on a rampage."

By this time they had cared for their horses, and as a bluff, hearty manner was imperatively necessary, they joined the outlaws and took care not to be backward. For the time being they were in the power of these men. They could not fight ten times their own number successfully, and, while deeply regretting the check to their efforts to rescue Blanche, it was clear that they must follow the fortunes of the band until opportunity occurred to escape.

New cause for anxiety at once arose, however. One of the men was talking earnestly with Jaffrin, aside, and both looked at Walt and Somerville as they spoke.

The fictitious outlaws were clearly the objects of conversation, and the idea occurred to both that Somerville had been recognized. Their situation seemed growing more precarious.

## CHAPTER XII.

### BLANCHE.

It was with feelings of undescribable despondency that Blanche Beauvais left Paradise Valley in company with her wild captors. She had borne up while within sight of her friends, knowing that a word from her would precipitate a fight which could only end in the destruction of her defenders, but, once clear of the valley, she tried no longer to wear a brave face. Her head drooped, and she rode like one going to her own execution.

She was going to worse. Death she could have faced as those who have a clear conscience may, but to go to the Sioux village; to become the squaw of Sweeping Eagle; to give up friends, civilization, hope; and to cast her lot forever among the red Indians—

"Better death than that—far better death!" was the thought always in her mind.

Judson Killough rode with them beyond World's End, talking with the chief, but, once out of the Basin, farewells were said; the outlaws went their way; the journey was resumed; and Blanche went on with no company but that of the Indians.

She was riding beside Sweeping Eagle at the front, and he turned a keen pair of eyes upon her.

"Velvet Eyes, you are sad," he said, in his remarkably correct English.

"Why should I be otherwise?"

"You forget who rides beside you. Ask the red man, or the white man, who Sweeping Eagle is, and he will tell you that the Sioux nation boasts not a braver warrior."

"War is to me a thing of horror."

"Then war shall never come near the white girl. She shall see only what is fair, and good, and to her taste. The bravest of warriors are never harsh, and the heart of Sweeping Eagle is tender as a woman's."

"Prove it, then, by allowing me to go. Do this and I will bless you forever. Would the Indian be happy in the cities of the white men? Take your cue from that, and tell me if you think a white girl can endure life among your people, so strange to her."

"Velvet Eyes, you are cunning, but you would not be a woman were it different. All women are cunning, but their devices are not strong. The snow of winter may grow deep and solid, but the sun of spring will melt it away. So of the plots of your sex. You talk well, but you only make your value more plain to the Indian."

Blanche sighed and was silent. There was not an atom of pity in the face turned toward her; not a wavering of the bold, black, snaky eyes bent upon her. She saw the folly of argument, and rode in downcast silence.

"When you go to my lodge," pursued Sweeping Eagle, after a pause, "you shall be second to no woman of the great Sioux nation. All shall yield you respect; you shall never soil



your hands with labor; rich attire and money shall be yours; slaves, red or white, shall do your bidding; and the kindness of your chief shall teach your eyes to grow bright when the enemies of Sweeping Eagle tremble and grow pale at sound of his name and deeds of battle."

"All this is nothing to me," wearily replied the girl.

"You are hard to please!"

It was a curt, vicious retort, and the black eyes glittered and grew more serpent-like.

"I ask but one thing—liberty."

"You ask in vain."

"You are proving your 'tenderness' of heart," Blanche bitterly said.

"Take care that I do not prove its relentlessness."

"I expect that you will."

Some savage retort trembled on the chief's lips, but he repressed it and rode on in silence. His expression had changed, however, and his face bore a sullen look not calculated to increase Blanche's feeling of security. Good time was made along the trail while day lasted, but shortly after dark, they encamped in a ravine and proceeded to make themselves at ease.

A recess in a perpendicular wall of rock was given to Blanche for her occupancy, and she was somewhat roughly ordered not to go beyond it.

Sweeping Eagle was still in his surly mood, and did not come near her during the evening. After a time he sent a subordinate with two blankets, and then she was again left alone.

The Indians lay down, one after another, until all were recumbent with the exception of the guards. A fire which had been left burning lighted up the scene and made a striking picture for the prisoner's eyes. The prostrate figures were so wild and barbarous that they seemed to her not unlike creatures from another world, and fiendish in the extreme. She shivered as she looked, and then covered her face with her hands and did not venture to look again.

The night which followed seemed interminably long, and among all her meditations she could find no ray of hope. Her friends in the valley were helpless; Sweeping Eagle was merciless; and the long miles which stretched between her and the settlements seemed to do away with the last chance.

Another day dawned at last; the Sioux were early astir; and Sweeping Eagle came to her with a manner as of old. His anger had vanished, or he had determined to make another effort to win her by tact.

If it was the latter, he received little encouragement.

Another weary journey was begun, and no halt made until the sun reached the zenith. Then the party encamped in a depression which, surrounded as it was with rocks, trees, bushes and rank vegetation, was beautiful enough for poetic fancy. Here they had dinner, but, instead of moving on when it was finished, the chief led his prisoner a few rods away to the crest of the ridge.

"Look!" he said, proudly. "There is the land of the Sioux!"

Blanche obeyed, and saw a wide extent of fertile, beautiful prairie country, but with her it was only a cold, casual glance. Her gaze wandered back to the chief.

"On that wide tract of land there is game in abundance," added the Indian, "and it belongs to the Sioux alone."

"Let them keep it; I want no share in it."

The girl spoke recklessly, curtly, and Sweeping Eagle's black eyes flashed.

"Be careful, girl!" he exclaimed, sibilantly.

"Don't anger me past endurance."

"Why should I consider your feelings when you care nothing for mine?"

"Prudence requires it."

"Prudence!"

"Yes. I am a lamb when well used; a devil, when my evil nature is stirred."

"Mr. Sweeping Eagle, I have made a discovery."

He started a little; then slowly asked

"What is it?"

"You are no more an Indian than I am. The truth has been dawning on me all day, and now your Indian stateliness of speech disappears when you are angry. You are a white man!"

He folded his arms and looked at her steadily. The discovery did not seem to trouble him much, but, mixed with dogged persistence, there was curiosity expressed on his face. This finally found vent in words.

"Suppose this is so, what difference will it make in your feeling toward me?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Knowing me to be a white man, would you not see new glories ahead of you? I am rich and influential, and, being a leader in the projected uprising against the settlements, shall be richer still when the campaign is over. When that day comes you and I can leave these barbarians, go to Europe—possibly to Paris—and run a career which will make the crowned heads grow pale with envy."

"I shall never have such a career. Your money cannot buy me, sir, while as for you—do you suppose that I esteem you more, knowing you to be a white renegade, than when I thought you an Indian? Then you had in my

eyes one excuse; that of being true to your nature."

"We are few of us what we seem," pursued the chief, manifestly struggling hard to retain his composure, "and the same rule will apply to you. You think that you are Basil Beauvais's daughter; you are nothing of the kind."

"Undoubtedly, you ought to know," Blanche sarcastically retorted.

"I do know."

"I will accept your word without argument."

"Say plainly that you think me a liar."

"It would be a waste of words."

The renegade smiled darkly.

"Wholly unbelieving, I see. So be it; let me convince you. I say that you are not Beauvais's daughter. If you ever see him, ask if it is so. Ask him if he remembers Prairie Port and that winter storm, long years ago; ask if he remembers the man who came to his cabin that night, bearing a burden in his arms, shielding it from the cold, seeking for it a home and asylum. Girl, that burden was *you*, a feeble infant; the man, or boy, for he had not reached his majority, was I!"

"This is a good story to tell," replied Blanche, but her manner was not as easy as her words; there was an air of sincerity in the man's words and manner which troubled her.

"It is true."

"You were careful not to mention this in the presence of Basil Beauvais."

"I did not want it known."

"Nor denied, I dare say."

"Doubt me if you will, but I swear that I speak the truth. There is a mystery hanging over your past which only I can explain. Beauvais has reared you as his own child, but he knows that you are not. Who you are he does not know; the extent of his knowledge is that you were brought to his house the night of the storm, when you were an infant, by me; but the facts of your history are locked in this mind alone."

He touched his forehead as he spoke.

"No doubt they are creditable to you," said Blanche, with unconcealed sarcasm, though a sense of desolation and friendlessness had fallen upon her heart like an icy hand.

"If to give decent burial to murdered parents, and then bear their child long miles through a driving storm, be to one's credit, then I deserve it."

"Were *you* present when the murder was committed?"

Her meaning was not to be mistaken, and furious anger flamed in the chief's eyes. He roughly caught her arm, and, losing all control of his temper, raised the other hand as though to strike her.

A blow followed, but the renegade was the recipient, not the giver. He fell to the ground, and then, as Blanche looked like one dazed, she saw another man standing in his place, one foot on the chief's breast.

The new-comer was Black Hills Ben!

## CHAPTER XIII.

### KILLOUGH MAKES A PROPOSAL.

There was great, though subdued, excitement among the captives of Paradise Valley. One of their comrades had escaped. During the night they had not suspected the truth, though some of their number had heard the report of the alarming rifle, but when they gathered in the morning, Somerville was not there.

If they had failed to understand this, a visit from Gregerson would have made all plain. He came to see who the escaped gunmaker had been, but did not tarry after getting the desired information.

This event excited the prisoners and gave them a ray of hope. Somerville was young, brave and hardy; it was possible that he might reach the settlements and give the alarm. Rescue now became a possibility, though not a probability, and they tried to look toward the future bravely.

They did not know how Somerville had left the valley, but they did appreciate his reason for making no confidants. He had run a risk where the chances were overwhelmingly against him, and it seemed almost a miracle that he had escaped death. Believing that such would be his fate, he had gone without a word to the other gunmakers.

He now stood higher than ever in their estimation.

But little work was done that forenoon until, at about eleven o'clock, the outlaw overlord dropped in upon them. Then their movements quickened, though he proved to be in unusually good humor. He had been drinking freely, and this made him a different man than the surly person they had been accustomed to.

The liquor loosened his tongue, and he talked freely of Somerville's escape, describing how it had been effected, and adding that the gunmaker was still at liberty.

One piece of news which he gave was not so agreeable. He said that Judson Killough was on the scene, and in a terrible temper. He had poured his wrath freely upon Gregerson's head, when he heard of the escape, and would have shot him only for Bart Starbuck's interference. This saved the valley manager's life, but Kil-

lough was "still raving," as their informant expressed it, and all the outlaws were on nettles.

The gunmakers did not care anything for the outlaws' troubles, but the possibility that Killough would vent his wrath upon his prisoners was quite a different matter.

As the hours rolled on these fears gradually grew less acute, and by the middle of the afternoon the subject was no longer mentioned among the laborers. Danger, however, is often near when little expected.

As a rule an outlaw visitor to the valley was seen before he had crossed half the space, but it came to pass on this occasion that a man came down the rocky stairway, crossed the level and reached the tents unseen even by the women. He went at once to the quarters of the Benningtons and walked into the tent without the shadow of formality or warning.

Claudia was there, and alone. She was partially reclining upon her couch, but sprung to her feet as she saw the intruder. He removed his hat and bowed low, but she stood looking at him with startled eyes, while her face had an unusual pallor.

The intruder was Killough, and she, remembering his bold, lawlessly-admiring glances on a former occasion, was filled with a greater fear than had ever before assailed her. She argued the worst from this visit.

"So you are here, Miss Bennington," the lieutenant said, with a blandness which did not allay her fears.

"Yes, sir."

"I am glad to see you looking so well—also, glad to see that you are alone."

"I—I will call my father, sir."

She took a step toward the door, but he laughed and stopped her with a motion.

"Don't! I have no desire to see your superannuated parent; greater attractions have drawn me here. I want to talk with *you*, my dear young lady. Pray sit down again!"

Claudia obeyed, but her face did not regain its usual color so readily. Killough was in an amiable mood, but she feared him all the more on that account. She believed that in this case his anger was safer than his friendship. Naturally stern and imperious, smiles did not rest well on his dark face; his blandness was not at home in its present quarters, so to speak, and his effort to be pleasant was almost painful.

"How do you like your new home?" he continued.

"I cannot say that I like it, sir," she faintly answered.

"You are from the East?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask what brought you to this wild region?"

Claudia hesitated. She was for a moment tempted to confide in him, and ask his help to find Dunstan Hughes, but one glance at the face before her settled that inclination; she dared not owe anything to Judson Killough.

"I wanted to see the country," she replied, feeling that the explanation was very weak.

"Bravo! I admire your spirit. There are few women who would dare to come here, though."

Claudia did not answer, and, after a pause, he went on, his eyes all the while dwelling upon her face with bold, undisguised admiration.

"You are one well fitted for the life, when once the taint of Eastern associations is worn off. With your queenly beauty, and majestic form, you are well qualified to be a leader among the hardy, chivalrous, free men of the West. By Jove, you are a veritable empress in your right!"

Claudia shivered.

"I seek no such distinction," she replied.

"Honors come to the deserving, unsought. Miss Claudia, I am a plain, blunt man, and you must not think me too abrupt if I speak my mind freely on this subject. You see in me, Judson Killough, a man of power to-day. I acknowledge the authority of but one living person—the Grand Chief of our League—and he gives me unbounded liberty of action. Thousands of men acknowledge *my* authority to-day. Whether my command is 'Come' or 'Go,' they obey without a murmur. My sway is absolute over these varied thousands!"

The speaker drew up his figure, his eyes glowed, and he was not without an impressive dignity, but through it all ran an ominous something, as dark as his own swarthy face.

"Anon," he continued, "I shall be more powerful, and all the country west of the Mississippi will bow down to me; honors and riches will crowd upon me in boundless profusion; the civilized world will ring with my name; and kings will admit me their equal. Miss Bennington, until of late I had expected to enjoy these honors alone, but now that I have seen you, I ask you to share them. Will you be my wife? May I rely upon you to be the guiding star of my ambition, the counselor of my actions, the empress of my reign, and the queen of my heart?"

Killough had grown eloquent. His usual cold, calculating moderation had given place to enthusiasm, and his eyes were like two baleful planets gleaming upon the girl. He was terribly in earnest.



Claudia was pale, trembling and frightened, and to his last words she gasped a husky reply:

"No, no!"

"What am I to understand by that?"

"That I cannot accept your offer. I—I thank you, but it cannot be."

"You decline to marry me?"

"I must. We are—are not suited to each other."

Killough smiled. He felt that a rejection was "a trifle light as air" when she was so overwhelmingly in his power. He intended to possess her, whether or no. A crafty expression appeared on his face, and he replied:

"If you hold such views you should not be in the West, my dear young lady. One of your queenly beauty cannot live and move among our mountain men without bringing them all to your feet. Go back to the States! Why were you mad enough to come here?"

"I came on a mission."

She made the confession almost mechanically, but he had turned her thoughts to the ruling passion of her life. For a time she forgot her own situation, and his proposal, and thought only of that man—her chosen husband—who was waiting in the East under sentence of death—waiting for her to save him.

Killough's eyes glistened.

"What was that mission?" he blandly asked.

"To find a certain man."

"What is his name?"

"Dunstan Hughes."

"It is strange to me, but, of course, he may have abandoned it for another, now that he is in the West. It is a fashion many men have. Why, he may even be one of my band!"

It was a crafty insinuation. Killough was interested; he wished to learn all about this singular matter. It puzzled him to know what could have taken the girl to that remote place. His wily words bore fruit, and Claudia, thinking only of doomed Edgar Wheaton, quickly asked:

"Will you help me?"

"How can I? I can't bring all the band here."

"I have a picture of Hughes."

"Ha! now we reach a business basis. Let me see the picture, if you will, and if I recognize it, I will frankly say so. As I before remarked, the man may be one of my followers, known to me by an alias."

The ruling passion was still strong, and Claudia produced the picture and gave it to him. She watched his face closely, and saw a look of intelligence at once flash over it—a token of recognition which, she felt sure, was too strong to be feigned.

"Do you know him?" she cried.

"I do."

"And—and—he is—"

Excitement prevented coherent utterance, but the outlaw calmly replied:

"He is one of my men!"

"Under what name do you know him?" she demanded, her face flushed with excitement.

"Wait a trifle. Are you very anxious to find him?"

"A human life depends upon it. There is a man in the East who is unjustly condemned to die for murder. Dunstan Hughes, alone, can save him. That is why I have come all these weary miles, and dared all these perils."

Claudia had never before seemed so beautiful in Killough's eyes. Her face was flushed; her eyes sparkled; her whole manner was eager; and he saw that, queenly as she was, she was anything but a woman of ice.

"You must be very much in earnest to dare so much for this condemned man," the outlaw replied.

"I am."

"What is that man to you?"

The practical, slowly-spoken question gave her a shock. The eagerness faded from her face, and she remembered to whom she was talking.

"He is a—a valued friend," she hesitatingly answered.

Killough smiled grimly.

"He shall be saved—on one condition."

"And that?"

"Is that you become my wife!"

"That can never be."

"You can't feel very deeply for the condemned man in the East, if you will make no sacrifice for him."

"It is because I do feel deeply for him that I refuse."

"In other words, that condemned man is your lover?"

"He is," said Claudia, desperately.

"Marry me, and I will see that Dunstan Hughes goes East and saves the man."

"You ask too much, and you would take advantage of my helpless condition. This is not as brave, manly and chivalrous as you should be."

"Is it nothing that I promise to save your lover?"

"Is it nothing that you make the condition that I must give him up, and marry you, to have him saved?"

"Reflect," urged Killough. "Remember who you are, who I am, and our respective positions. You are weak; I am powerful. You are a captive; I am a master. I have only to will it, and

you become my bride unconditionally, in which case that Eastern man hangs. But I can save him, for I solemnly swear that Hughes is one of my men, and if I order him to go East and testify, he will go without a murmur. With all this power in my hands; with boundless authority over you, Hughes, and thousands of other subjects; with the privilege of a king and conqueror, I nevertheless bow my head meekly to you, and offer a reward for your willing acceptance of my offer of marriage. Become my wife, and your lover shall be saved!"

There was a good deal of energy, and something of pleading, in his words, but Claudia shrunk back with startled eyes. Once more her mind was all on herself, and Judson Killough seemed to her not unlike a rattlesnake.

"I—I can't do this," she faltered.

The outlaw frowned, and curtly asked:

"Why not?"

"The proposal is not agreeable."

"In plainer words, I am not agreeable to you, eh?"

"Forgive me, but that is it!"

Killough smiled, but there was nothing pleasant or natural about it. He slowly replied:

"You may be frank, or only coquetting. In either case I have no time to coax you; I am a man of business, and seldom indulge in idle talk. I have deviated from my rule, to-day, because I really wished you to marry me willingly, but now I have no more empty words to say. I'll put my sole proposal bluntly: Will you marry me without rebellious murmuring, and thereby save your lover's life? or must I take an unwilling bride? If it must be the latter, then your lover hangs; Dunstan Hughes shall not be allowed to save him. I swear it. Now, what is your answer? It all rests with you!"

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### THE SCOUT AND THE SIOUX.

THE sudden appearance of Ben Todd amazed Blanche. She had not had a thought of him, and he came mysteriously. One moment Sweeping Eagle stood before her, angry and menacing; the next, the scout was standing in his place, his foot upon the renegade's breast. It was a remarkable transformation scene.

Black Hills Ben cast a glance toward the Sioux camp—the red warriors were rendered invisible by intervening bushes, but, really, were so near that an outcry would bring them to the spot in a body.

The scout presented his revolver to Sweeping Eagle's head.

"Be silent!" he commanded. "Do not try to sound an alarm; your life depends upon your silence."

The chief looked up with a ferocious glare in his black eyes. The blow which had felled him had been almost stunning, and his head was still far from clear, but he recognized the ring in the scout's voice which told of stern determination. He dared not send out the cry which should alarm his followers. This man whose foot was on his breast was not one to brook disobedience. He saw this plainly, though he did not know who his assailant was.

Blanche suddenly uttered a faint cry as an Indian glided to the spot, but grew calm in another instant. The new-comer was not a Sioux, but Windfoot, the Pawnee.

Black Hills Ben's face cleared.

"Just in time," he observed. "Tie up this fellow, Windfoot, while I hold my revolver at his head, and be sure that you tie the knots to stay. Mr. Sioux, if you give one yell I shall be obliged to put a bullet through your head."

Sweeping Eagle did not answer. He was too proud to ask for mercy, or to make a promise, but though he looked up boldly into his conqueror's face, he dared not sound an alarm.

It would be his own death-signal.

Not a word spoke the Pawnee, but down on his knees he dropped, and his nimble fingers operated the cords, which he had produced from some part of his attire, so deftly that the chief was in a short time rendered helpless. When a gag had been added, the work was done.

Then Ben turned to Blanche.

"Follow Windfoot like a shadow. I will bring up the rear. Beware of touching a loose stone."

The girl obeyed these terse directions without a word, and they glided away. The danger was by no means over. The Sioux were within a few yards, and, at the best, discovery could not long be delayed. When once Sweeping Eagle was at liberty he would be full of rage, and a hot pursuit would follow. In one sense of the word rescue meant but little, for the Indians and their allies could send a force on the trail which would almost render the mountain black with men.

When a few rods had been passed over, the scout came to Blanche's side and took her by the arm.

"Are you good at running?" he asked.

"Yes," was the prompt reply.

"Prove it now. We will not over-exert ourselves, but the sooner we gain our horses, which are not far away, the more hope we shall have. I'd like a slight start of those fellows, as the odds are against us."

His manner was so quiet and matter-of-fact that Blanche looked into his face in admiration. From the first he had been as cool as though no danger was at hand, yet manifestly on the alert.

"I have no words in which to properly thank you, Mr. Todd—"

"Don't try, at present. It's a simple matter, and I've been trying to rescue you ever since that night fight."

"How did you escape then?"

"Rode through them. My part was easy enough, but Windfoot had a close call. He was knocked senseless and left on the field for dead, mixed with the slain Sioux, but recovered and crawled away. Can you tell me of Walt Wilkins?"

Blanche briefly described how the veteran had been seen to fall into the canyon.

"I wish I had known that, and I would not have left the place until I knew his fate. I'm afraid the fall was fatal, though the old ranger has the reputation of having a charmed life. He may have escaped—"

He paused, stopped by a yell which was borne to them on the still air.

"The reprieve is over," he added, "the bound chief has been discovered, and we shall now have the whole gang whooping after us."

Blanche did not answer, but there was no trembling of her arm in the scout's grasp. Her border experience was a good friend then, and, coupled with her natural bravery, made her far more composed than was to be expected.

Black Hills Ben looked at her admiringly.

Windfoot turned a scornful face toward them.

"The Sioux wolves howl bravely when in packs," he observed, "but they are cowards at heart!"

Having thus given an opinion, he went on contentedly, not feeling obliged to explain that his assertion was more figurative than exact. Perhaps he believed it, though. A few yards beyond they came upon the horses. One had been stolen from the Sioux' own camp for Blanche. The girl and her rescuers quickly mounted and dashed away as fast as the nature of the ground would allow, but the yells of the enemy were now floating after them in a chorus.

Ben cast a glance back, and then briefly addressed the Pawnee:

"Go on as we planned; I'll bring up the rear."

"Ugh!" returned Windfoot, and the separation was made.

Blanche looked anxiously after the scout, but did not venture to oppose his plan. She believed that he knew his business better than she, and let it go at that. Her sole companion was now the taciturn Pawnee, and she looked at him closer than ever before. His face was not a bad one, and his expression unusually intelligent for one of his race. He was nearly as wild as the Sioux, however, and his glittering eyes showed that his choice would have been to turn and fight his old enemies.

"Have we any hope?" asked Blanche, anxious to hear some friendly voice.

"Heap of it," was the terse reply.

"But the Sioux vastly outnumber us."

"Mebbe they not outnumber us, bime-by."

"A fight ought to be avoided, if possible."

"Windfoot like fight, heap."

"I don't."

"Pawnee fight 'nuff for two, den."

"Hark!"

Blanche uttered the monosyllable with a start. The crack of a rifle had sounded behind them.

"Black Hills Ben, he fire," said Windfoot.

"One Sioux dead."

The speaker looked back with dilating nostrils. He seemed like a war-horse scenting the battle-smoke, and his dusky fingers worked nervously on the barrel of his rifle. Nothing would have pleased him more than to go back and plunge headlong into the fight.

Other shots followed; a perfect fusillade had opened, and the rocks rung with the irregular fire. Blanche's face was anxious, but the Pawnee reminded her that the shooting was proof that the scout still lived. The scene of conflict seemed to keep at just about such a distance from them, and it was clear that Black Hills Ben was covering their retreat by making a running fight.

Their way had been a hard one, but there was every indication that they were nearing the top of the ascent when the scout came galloping after them, reloading his revolvers as he rode.

He made a gesture to hasten their movement, but, otherwise, seemed as unconcerned as ever.

"Thank Heaven, he still lives!" said Blanche.

"No Sioux ever kill him," Windfoot returned. "Some say, mebbe, Sioux kill me, but I den be old and carry two hundred Sioux scalps."

While he was making this modest assertion the horses were scrambling up an acclivity where such ascent seemed almost impossible. Windfoot sprang off and his animal passed the crest; Blanche followed; and Ben, starting at more rapid speed, came up almost at a gallop, but in a way anything but safe.



As he did so, discordant yells arose from the rear.

The Sioux had again sighted them.

Todd leaped from his horse.

"I'll stop here again," he said, quietly. "Go on, Windfoot, and don't forget my directions."

Blanche looked back and, brave as she was, her face grew pale. The Sioux were dashing forward in a body, their horses going at full speed, and as they waved their weapons and yelled in concert, they seemed to her like veritable fiends unloosed from the lower world.

"Don't try to oppose them alone—"

"I'll hear the rest later," interrupted the scout, grimly. "Go on, Miss Blanche, and don't worry about me."

He gave her horse a sharp blow, and the animal darted away at full speed. Blanche looked back. Black Hills Ben had gone to the highest point of land. There he lay prone, each hand grasping a revolver, and the muzzles directed toward the whooping Sioux.

Even as she looked the revolvers began to work. The red-skins were mounting the acclivity, and the scout was fighting the whole party. Death seemed inevitable to him!

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### LAKE DESOLATION.

It did, indeed, seem as though Ben Todd was putting his life in peril which he could not overcome, but he had a well-defined plan, and expected to make it uncommonly hot for the Sioux before they could score a decisive point. What the end would be only the future could tell. He hoped for the best.

He was sending down bullet after bullet with deadly precision, when other shots were added to his own. They came from a point to his right, and he thought that some of the Indians had gained the summit, but as he turned his head somewhat anxiously, he saw that which put a new aspect on the case.

Two men were there; their faces were as white as his, and their fire was being delivered, not against him, but into the party of Sioux. The scout uttered a shout. One of these men was Wild West Walt; he had two unexpected allies to help him fight the battle out.

His shout was answered, but none of the trio ceased work. The leaden hail went whizzing down; the foremost Indians fell and toppled over against the living, and consternation seized upon the survivors. They broke and fled, as though actuated by one mind.

Pursuit or continued firing was not thought of, but Walt ran toward the scout.

"My advice is, git up an' slide," the veteran exclaimed. "In the course o' natur' them red imps will soon be at us ag'in, and travelin' is good jest now."

"You are right," replied Ben, "but have you horses? I retreat in haste."

"So do I, when I git a chance. Yes, we hev hosses. Black Hills Ben, this is Hugh Somerville, a chap arter yer own heart. Shake hands when ye git time, but 'tend ter runnin' now. I see ye hev the Princess in charge, though how it come about I dunno. Queer ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

The scout had remounted, and as Somerville led two horses out of a recess, he and Walt sprung to the saddles, and the three went dashing after Blanche and Windfoot.

"Your comin' was very timely," said the scout.

"Great snakes! yes; that is, ef we wanted any fun. The way you was wipin' them chaps out threatened a depopulation o' the Sioux nation, by sixty! Reminded me o' a fight I had onc't ag'in' 'bout three thousand Kinanches on a prairie. They come at me on all sides, an' fur two days I did nothin' but stand thar an' shoot Injuns. When I was done I had a circle on 'em piled up round me over forty feet high. Couldn't climb 'em, an' it begun ter look like starvation, but I tuk my knife an' tunneled under the pile, arter a good bit o' hard work."

The scout and Somerville waited patiently for the conclusion of this veracious story, and then Walt and Ben Todd exchanged narratives of their respective experiences.

The latter told of his escape at the time of the canyon fight; of his reunion with Windfoot, after the latter recovered his senses; how they followed the outlaws and their prisoners to Paradise Valley; and how, when they saw Blanche taken away by Sweeping Eagle, they had secretly pursued, hung upon the Sioux trail, and finally rescued her.

Walt's story is known to the reader with the exception of that part which followed his union with Jake Jaffrin's band of outlaws in company with Somerville. Their idea that they were suspected by their companions was erroneous, and a few chance glances magnified to positive danger; but when they learned that a long journey was ahead of the party, to get supplies, they had watched their opportunity and deserted.

Chance had brought them to the scout's aid when such aid was most needed.

The trio soon overtook Blanche and Windfoot, and the reunion was a happy one. Walt was full of extravagant speeches concerning the "Princess," while, if they said but little,

Blanche and Somerville looked and thought a good deal.

Since he tried to save her from Sweeping Eagle in the valley, Blanche had realized the young gunmaker's attachment to her, and was glad and proud in the knowledge that one she regarded so highly really cared for her.

No halt was made, and Black Hills Ben and Wild West Walt soon spoke to a practical point.

"In the course o' natur'," said the latter, "you vego tsome def'nit' plan in view, but I observe you're headin' straight fur Paradise Valley."

"We shall find a refuge near there."

"Glad on't, by hickory! Ef thar's any one thing I hanker arter *bad*, it's a refuge; while as fur the Princess—great snakes! she must be all in a quiver."

"I am not such a timid creature as you think, Mr. Walt Wilkins!" the girl retorted.

"Thar's sperit fur ye! Thar's yer border heroine! Thar's yer Joan, of the Ark! Strange sech bravery should be bundled up in sech small compass. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"To return to our subject," said the scout, "Windfoot and I did not hover around Paradise Valley for nothing, and we have a refuge in view. It is at Lake Desolation."

"Lake Desolation!" Blanche exclaimed. "Why, that is in the midst of the outlaws—almost beside Paradise Valley."

"So much the better; no one would think of looking for us there. Besides, we are bound to rescue all the gunmakers, or die in the attempt, and here again Lake Desolation becomes a desirable home for us."

"You're right, as usual," replied Walt, "an' we'll go thar—ef the red imps give us a chance."

"Can it be that we're not pursued?" Somerville asked uneasily.

"You kin safely rely on't they ain't nigh when Windfoot wears sech a placid face. That creature ain't easy ter fool, is he, Black Hills Ben?"

"Those who have tried it will tell you he is not, if there is enough of them left to answer."

"Ondoubtedly. Yes, the Pawnee's a good 'un, though he has one weakness. He won't chew the weed; but then, a heathen ain't s'posed ter be up in medicine. It's amazin', Ben Todd, how terbacker builds up the nervous system an' makes flesh. Knowed a man onc't who was troubled with dropsy, an' it made him so 'tarnally thin that his bones would prick right through his clothes. He had ter buy a new suit o' garment ev'ry other day, which made it expensive. He tuk ter smokin' mod'rately, usin' erbout fifty-three cigars a day, an' the last I heard on him he was on exhibition in a dime museum as a fat man, an' his weight was a grain over seven hundred an' ninety pounds."

Walt seemed as contented as though danger was a thing he never expected to see again, but his keen eyes were never on one object long at a time. He saw everything worthy of notice, and was rivaled by each of the other men.

They were in extreme peril, and they knew it. It was surprising that Sweeping Eagle's party had not again appeared, but even if they had given up the chase, danger was liable to menace them at any turn. It would be remarkable if they passed on without seeing either Indian or outlaws.

Blanche realized all this, but, as she looked at the four muscular men who accompanied her, she felt that she had a guard such as was seldom vouchsafed an imperiled girl.

The fugitives kept on at full speed. Ben had chosen another path than that which led to World's End, and one far more open. He knew that, at a certain point, they would have to abandon their horses, but this was a necessity in any case; and by the northern route they could ride twice as rapidly as along the usual trail, and also go nearly as far toward the desired refuge.

Perhaps Providence protected them during the ride; certain it is that they were not opposed or molested, and, an hour before dark, they reached the point where the horses were to be left. This was done, and then followed a hard scramble up the steep ascent; a cautious journey among the gulches, where they were often within sight of the outlaws, though themselves unseen; and then, just as darkness fairly fell, they reached the shore of Lake Desolation. Although so close to the gunmakers' prison-place, none of the fugitives except Ben Todd and Windfoot had ever been there before.

The remainder of the party looked in wonder and curiosity.

The lake lay like a sea of glass before them, and though, in the darkness, little of it could be seen, all were impressed with the idea that it was well named. It seemed dismal in the extreme—almost like some weird, haunted lake of tradition.

"A consarned pokerish place!" declared Wild Walt. "It's more solumboly than a graveyard, 'cause ye can't break the monotony by readin' the epitaphs on the head-stones."

"I trust that you know a good hiding-place, Mr. Todd," said Somerville, uneasily.

"I think that I may safely say I do."

"Take us thar afore the ghosts gobble us," said Walt. "Knowed a man onc't who was ab-

ducted by a ghost, an' carried seven million miles off; but the ghost's heart weakened, an' he give the feller a pocket compass ter find his way back. He did git back, too—"

The veteran stopped, staggered and fell, while at the same moment a revolver flashed only a few feet away. Almost before Walt touched the ground Black Hills Ben bounded like a tiger toward the unknown marksman. There was another flash—a report—a second fall. Somebody was down, but whether it was the scout or his enemy the other fugitives could not tell.

Somerville sprung to Ben's aid, but, as he did so, a bullet whistled past his ear. They seemed to be in a nest of foes!

#### CHAPTER XVI.

##### TOMBSTONE ROCK.

BEFORE the gunmaker could turn toward the new quarter of peril a revolver flashed almost beside him, and Walt Wilkins's voice sounded emphatically.

"Take that, you miser'ble sneak! I kin play at your game, too, only my play is sometimes raver rough."

The veteran, who had not been injured by the bullet which felled him, had fired by the flash of the second unknown's revolver. He sprung toward that point, and found a man lying prone on the ground. Walt had fired with unerring aim, and the man would never press trigger again.

Somerville saw Windfoot flash to Black Hills Ben's aid, and as Blanche was thus left alone, he remained by her side. He was not needed. The scout returned dragging a prisoner.

"Is any one hurt?" Ben asked.

"Reckon not," Wild West Walt replied.

"Thar's a heathen renegade over yon, but he's out o' the way o' hurts. He tuk a morphine pill, or suthin' else that was quietin'. Cheer up, Princess; thar ain't the least iota o' danger. We men got up this taberleau jest fur fun. Ain't no more on 'em, is thar, Windfoot?"

"No more now."

"Good. Hev a chaw, Pawnee?"

"You chew weed, 'self!" exclaimed Windfoot, curtly.

"I will, thank you. Hev ter take it, owin' ter some 'fiction o' the palate."

"We best git away from here, *darn* quick!" the Pawnee added, looking around apprehensively.

"You are right," said the scout, "but what is to be done with my prisoner?"

"Got a knife, ain't ye?" asked Walt.

"So have you."

"Ya-as; sartain. But 'tain't my way ter stab a helpless man, villain or not. That's my weakness, an' I hope you'll overlook it. I've tried fur years ter be a cut-throat, but I can't. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"It's not my style, either," said the scout, "and I can see but two ways before us. Shall we hold this fellow prisoner, or set him free?"

"That would be injudicious," interrupted Somerville. "He would alarm his fellow-ruffians within ten minutes."

"Let me look at the creature," said Walt. "I'm skillful at analuzerin' human natur', an' I'll sorter see what he's made on. We'll treat him by his style, mebbe, though that promably means hangin'. Pawnee, git a rope ready."

Walt's manner was as little tinged with blood-thirstiness as when he spoke of the scout's knife. He was neither merciless nor cruel, and many a trouble had he been brought into by his lack of severity in dealing with villains once in his power.

"Wal, creature," he continued, "what've ye got ter say why the sentence o' death should not be pronounced upon ye?"

"Bring on your thumb-screws!" promptly retorted the prisoner. "Bind me to the rock! Break me on the wheel, if you will! Show me your hot irons!"

"Want suthin' hot, do ye?" genially inquired Walt. "Wal, by sixty, thar is rhyme an' reason in that, but we ain't got water nor whisky, an' you'll hev ter take the stick plain. Mister, what might be yer name?"

"It might be Julius Caesar, Hannibal or Scipio."

"Great snakes! I never had no idee we was entertainin' sech a dignitary. I feel sorter depressed by sech loftiness. Ain't used ter sech a—"

"Such an august presence," suggested Somerville.

"Zactly, or sech July presents, either, which is more to the p'int."

"We can't stop here any longer," interrupted Black Hills Ben, decisively. "Hold to your prisoner, Walt, and we will go to the refuge at once."

"I'm with ye. Come on, Skipio, but don't try ter skip away. I'm a reg'lar desperado when my mad is up, an' you had better treat me wal. Hugh, in the course o' natur' you'll see ter the Princess. I thought so. Think o' me in August presents! Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

The scout led the way to the northwest side of the lake. Here the accumulated water which, flowing down from the eastern mountains, emptied into Lake Desolation, found its way out of



the glassy sheet and flowed down the ascent in a series of falls, shoots and rapids. At the point where the stream left the lake, it flowed shallowly over an almost level ledge, which was like an outlet made by human hands.

Ben Todd kept to one side, where the ledge ceased and there were broken rocks, boulders, crevices and recesses in abundance. He paused to bid them follow closely, yet to have no fear, and then went on. The others went where he led, and surprise fell upon nearly all as they actually passed *under the lake*. They were following a cleft in solid rock, and though the darkness defied the sharpest eyes, it was evident that the natural corridor was narrow and low, yet unexpectedly dry.

For a few moments the sound of the water was audible; then all became silent save the echo of their own movements. Blanche pressed closer to Somerville.

"This is a strange refuge," she said, with a slight shiver.

"All the better for us."

"We are now directly under the lake?"

"Yes."

"Suppose it should cave in upon us?"

"Have no fear. While we follow the lead of Black Hills Ben we need ask no questions, for his judgment is always good. I am encouraged, Blanche. If the outlaws do not know of this refuge, they may be bothered to find it. Windfoot tells me that 'twas by the merest accident that he found the entrance."

"But where do we pause?"

Ben Todd heard the question and turned for a moment.

"Do you remember that, near the middle of the lake, an island of rock, as I may call it, rises above the surface of the glassy water?"

"I noticed this when I first came this way, a prisoner. Tombstone Rock, the outlaws call that freak of nature," replied the young gunmaker.

"I don't know its name, but in that formation is our hiding-place. You will be surprised when you see it."

"I am surprised already."

"But you haven't seen one-half. It was a lucky find when Windfoot stumbled upon the secret entrance."

"Reminds me o' the Cat-tombs, near Rome," said the cheerful voice of Wild West Walt, from the rear. "Great place, the Cat-tombs be, though why they call 'em that I don't know, by hickory! Ter bury men an' women in a vault, an' then call the place the 'Cat-tombs,' seems ter me jest a grain incongruous."

"The word you refer to is Catacombs," explained Blanche.

"Mebbe you're right, but that only complicates matters. I don't believe no cat ever carried a comb. I did once, but give up sech vanities arter I stopped goin' courin'. A cat uses her tongue ter polish up with, while I do like a hoss—lay down an' roll over."

"Here we are," said the scout. "Wait a second."

He struck a match, and soon communicated the blaze to a pine knot. As the light increased the adventurers looked about them. They were in a rock chamber sixty feet long and half as wide, with at least two corridors leading therefrom. Overhead was a singular view. The chamber narrowed steadily as it ascended, presenting a peculiar succession of ledges and balconies, and often assuming the form of tiny columns and pillars.

This place seemed to be dry and wholesome, and it was such a surprise to those who had never been there before that, for a time, no one made a remark.

It was Walt Wilkins who spoke first. Plunging his hand into his pocket he brought out a piece of tobacco, took a generous bite, and then held it toward the Pawnee.

"Chaw, Injun?"

"Me chaw you, sometime!" retorted Windfoot, angrily, as he turned away.

"If this refuge is as secure as appearances indicate, it is a wonderful place," said Somerville.

"No one would think of looking for us here."

"I think we may call it secure, unless suspicion is aroused," the scout answered; "and Windfoot and I have made a raid on the outlaws' stores. A smaller room at the east side of this one can be used for the kitchen. No fire will be needed for our comfort, and our cooking can be done at night, to prevent discovery of the smoke."

"A wonderful refuge, truly," Somerville added.

"A climb up the ledges is worth taking when we see fit, and, during the day, there is a good view of the lake—though, for that matter, it is a most dreary place."

"Dead—all dead!" put in the Pawnee.

"Now," sharply added the scout, "what have we here?"

He turned to the prisoner as he spoke, and all eyes became fixed upon the same person. He was a big man of upwards of fifty years, conspicuous chiefly because of his long hair and beard. Both were long, very abundant, gray, and so tangled and unkempt that other unshorn men might well have turned pale with envy. Plainly, too, he was not afraid of dirt, for he

used it, one would imagine, as an Indian does paint, though with less method. Face, hands and garments were covered with it, coat upon coat.

He had been a docile prisoner, though this conduct did not seem in keeping with a certain wild gleam to be seen in his eyes.

"Who are you?" Black Hills Ben added.

"Anybody you choose," was the ready reply.

"Great snakes! you ain't no ch'ice o' ourn, mister," observed Walt. "You're like a case o' small-pox—we ketched ye 'cause we couldn't help it."

"What's your name?" the scout continued.

"Haven't any, in particular."

"Do you belong to the League?"

"I might, an' then ag'in, I might not," the prisoner replied, with a crafty air.

"Do you know Killough?"

"I don't know nobody."

"Nor nothin'," Walt interpolated.

"Were you sent to watch us?"

"I am never sent. I'm a free creetur', I be; an' I go an' come ez I see fit."

"You won't 'go and come' as you see fit any more for awhile," the scout retorted. "Windfoot, tie him up. I hardly need to say that our lives depend upon keeping him fast."

"Me tie darn tight!" the Pawnee replied, and, aided by Walt, proceeded to do all he threatened, the prisoner submitting without a murmur.

This done, Ben directed Windfoot to take charge for awhile, and then asked Somerville to accompany him. They left the cave-room by a second corridor and went on through a place much like the entrance, except that it was lower, rougher, and, in places, wet with dripping water—a truly dismal place.

"We are still under the bed of the lake," observed the scout, "and going south. I will soon show you a view which may surprise you."

"Are we going toward Paradise Valley?"

"Yes."

"I think that I understand."

In a short time the passage ascended, and then widened and took the form of a steep ledge. Black Hills Ben scrambled up, seemed searching for something for awhile, and then called Somerville to his side.

"Here is an opening through the cliff. Look, and see what you can discover!"

Somerville obeyed. At first he saw only the dull, heavily-clouded sky, for the earth descended abruptly before him, but as he turned his gaze downward, other objects attracted his attention. He saw several lights glittering in a group, evidently in a roofless cavern in the bowels of the earth. The sight was weird at first view, but the truth soon flashed upon him. He was looking upon no new scene.

Those deep-seated lights; the white, specter-like shapes beside them; the oblong valley, with its towering walls of rock; the dimly-seen figures pacing along the verge of the cliffs—all this was familiar to the young man.

He was looking upon the prison-place of the gunmakers—Paradise Valley.

The twinkling lights seemed almost under his hand, yet they were separated from him by more than space. The heavy guard of outlaws shut him out as completely as it shut the captive gunmakers in.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### REVOLVER SHOTS IN THE VALLEY.

SOMERVILLE turned slowly to Ben Todd.

"The scene is well worth viewing," he observed.

"I am aware of it. I have done some watching from here myself, and I saw Blanche Beauvais taken away by Sweeping Eagle. It was because I had such timely warning that Windfoot and I were able to get on the trail so quickly."

"Mr. Todd, it wrings my heart to think of those captives."

"Their situation is not pleasant, but it is better than to be tied to the stake by Indians."

"The gunmakers are not injured in body, but they are captives, and forced to make weapons for those execrable villains. The ignominy of my life there nearly upset me. Think of it! Day by day I was making fire-arms which were destined for the murder of honest settlers; for the sacking of towns where there are helpless women. A murrain upon these outlaws! When we consider what their character is, and what a gigantic conspiracy they have afoot, it seems to me they are the basest, most dangerous wretches living."

"I'd like to know who their leader is."

"Even the men of the League don't know. To them he is only the 'Grand Chief,' and an invisible person. Judson Killough, and a few others, rank as lieutenants, and receive their orders from him, but they claim that even they do not meet him personally."

"A deep fellow, I should say."

"Or a coward."

"I hardly think he is that."

"Perhaps you are right. Judson Killough, the only one of the lieutenants whom, to my knowledge, I have met, is hardly the person to act a secondary part under any weak leader."

"Killough is said to be a person of strong character."

"Strong and merciless."

"Perhaps, if he molests us, he will get hurt. Well, Somerville, we may as well force the inevitable at once. We have work to do, and the odds against us are a thousand to one, or some such figure. You know why I came to this region. I am the guide of Miss Bennington, and she has dared all these perils to save her lover in the East. She wants to find one Dunstan Hughes."

"A hopeless quest, I should say."

"I told her so at the start, using every argument to keep her away, but she *would* come."

"And now she is a prisoner in Paradise Valley, and, though Hughes may be in World's End this very minute, as far from finding him as ever."

"So it looks, I confess."

"Leaving Miss Bennington individually, what of the gunmakers, collectively?"

"You want to see them rescued?"

"Yes."

"Of course we must attempt it. It will be a mad piece of work, but our duty is clear. Let us suppose we have in some way got them out of the valley. Then follows the march through World's End, where we may at any moment meet white, or red, foes. Let us suppose we get beyond World's End safely. What then? Our escape is discovered, and Killough will understand that if we reach the settlements, or a fort, his hopes are gone. If possible, he will communicate with the 'Grand Chief,' and that mysterious person will see the great work of his life tottering to its base. What then? All his immediate force of outlaws, and all of Sitting Bull's warriors, will be started after us. The earth will almost be black with them. But there is more. The alarm will be flashed ahead of us, and their allies will know the facts from here to Texas. If our way is not blocked, it will be a miracle!"

It was not in a despondent voice that the scout presented this gloomy picture. He was talking with a brave man, and simply presenting the facts of the case as they actually existed.

His words rather staggered Somerville, however.

"Not an encouraging prospect," he observed.

"Decidedly not."

"Have we any hope? Speak plainly!"

"There is always hope, and men often pull through tight places. I've done so, myself, before now. I don't want you to give up hope—decidedly not. I knew what I was daring when I became guide for the Benningtons; I came here with the intention of living through it; and I hope we shall all get back to the settlements in good shape."

Footsteps sounded in the passage, and Walt Wilkins joined them. The darkness within was intense, but a few words made all plain.

"Possibly you don't approve o' my strayin' away," said the veteran, "but the Princess would have it so. She's afeerd you'd git inter some compleration an' lose yer skulps, so I agreed ter foller ye, an' ef I was too late ter save yer lives, bring back yer aforesaid skulps. It's some time sence I've carried anybody's skulp but my own, though I used ter know a trapper who had a par-fict mania fur sech things. He ketched reds in traps, like you would beavers, an' brung in two top-knots a day, reg'lar; leastwise, that was what he said, but it finally got out that the same skulps did sarvice ev'ry day, an' that he'd bought 'em 'riginally o' a drunken Injun. That ha'r-lifter was driv from camp, but he got so skeered when alone, fur fear an Injun would find him, that we took him back on reprobation. That's the kind o' a skulper he was. What ye doin' hyar? Gone ter bed?"

"Look through this crevice, and tell us what you see," Somerville directed.

"I see a pile o' clouds before the risin' moon."

"Look lower; almost directly down."

"Now I see—Hullo! it's the gunmakers' valley, by sixty! Thar's the lights, an' the tents, an'—what now? Be they goin' ter hev comp'ny? Thar is torches descendin' ter the valley, an' men hitched onto the torches."

Black Hills Ben cast himself quickly down beside Wild West Walt, and the escaped gunmaker followed his example. Somerville saw the torches plainly, and with his knowledge of the valley, was able to understand everything at once.

Several men were descending the rope ladder—the inclined plane, used as a means of entrance and exit. Only four torches were carried, but these, moving irregularly, and gradually approaching the base of the cliff, flared up sufficiently to reveal the grim, frowning rocks and the men who followed after these leaders.

And the men were suspiciously numerous; they were marching down in a line; they tread close to each other's heels, and the line reached from top to bottom of the inclined plane.

"By Jove!" Somerville exclaimed, "some mischief is afoot! Why are all those fellows going to the valley at this hour?"

"There is excitement among the gunmakers," added the scout.

"Great snakes! yes," said Walt. "They've buzzed out like so many hornets, only they ain't the means o' stingin'. Comrades, I'm afeerd thar's mischief afoot!"

Somerville scarcely heard him. He saw the



outlaws go down until thirty or forty had gathered in the valley. Then the party marched toward the lower end of the gunmakers' home, the light of the torches falling on their brawny forms and ready weapons. The prisoners were all outside their tents. This the young man could dimly see, but the absence of marked light there gave him no further clew.

What did it all mean? What new complication had arisen? The outlaws were going in force, well armed. This was suspicious in the extreme, and suggested that some dark deed was about to be enacted.

Whatever it was, the gunmakers had expected it in a measure; they had promptly seen the outlaws, and came out to receive them. But how? Did they bear such rude weapons as they could lay their hands upon, and were they prepared to sell their lives bravely for some good object? Somerville was in a fever of impatience; he rebelled against the darkness which baffled his vision; but was left as ignorant as ever of the real attitude of the prisoners.

"I am going on a scout," said Ben Todd, suddenly, yet very quietly.

"I will accompany you," said Somerville.

"No; don't think of it. I go only to learn the facts; not to fight. You and I, in a fight against such odds, would be only a drop of water in the ocean."

"But humanity and duty—"

"Humanity and duty both require you to stay where we know your strong arm is needed. Do not forget Blanche Beauvais. I will say frankly that though matters look bad down there, I don't think anybody's life is in danger. There is some disturbance—that is plain. Let me go and learn what it is, while the rest of you remain here. There is one person whom we are duty-bound to protect—Blanche!"

"Sound reasonin', by hickory!" Walt added.

"Lad, our place is hyar, an' the Princess must never say we left her ter be gobbled by the redskins."

Both men had seen the necessity of calming Somerville, and they had cunningly touched the one chord which would vibrate to their touch, Blanche! The name, and its bearer, had marvelous power.

"Go, then," said the gunmaker, in a husky voice.

Black Hills Ben hurried away, while those who remained again devoted themselves to the task of watching. The outlaws had almost reached the valley slaves, and the light of their torches showed pale faces confronting them. Whatever the cause, the slaves were deeply moved.

Light steps sounded behind the watchers.

"It's the Princess," said Walt. "Why hev you come hyar? The place is dark, damp an' lonesome. You an' Hugh go back ter the main room, an' I'll take a nap, I reckon."

"You can't deceive me, Walt," replied the girl's clear tones. "Mr. Todd tried to do so, but I made him confess. There is trouble in the valley. Let me view the scene, too."

"You'll catch cold," protested the veteran; "I know you will; an' a cold ain't a thing ter be sneezed at—though it's sometimes done by reckless individuals—when no drug-store is nigh. Knowed a case o' the kind one't, an' the victim sneezed reg'lar fur a week. He made sech a commotion that all the Eastern papers reported earthquake shocks in the West—he was a right strong sneezer—an' some mountain trees was torn up by the roots. He got no peace until an extra-sized sneeze blowed the top o' his head off, skulp an' all, an' then the cold abated. Cold this way is serious, Princess; you'd better stay in the big room."

The veteran had been firmly barring her way, anxious to save her from seeing a possible tragedy, but she as firmly insisted on passing. She did pass, and watched with the others, although the moon had slid behind the heavy cloud-bank and the view was somewhat dim and obscure.

The outlaws had halted a few feet distant from the gunmakers, and the case looked more serious than ever. Somerville could see Garrison, Major Bennington and Long Dave Cobb at the front of the prisoners; a war of words was progressing; the gunmakers made warlike movements, and the outlaws' rifles were lowered to cover them, but whether in menace, or for instant use, was uncertain.

Suddenly three revolver shots were fired in succession, but the watchers could not tell by whom. No motion had been observed, and the light of the torches prevented the flashes of the weapons from being seen. Instantly, however, there was new commotion among the actors in the drama, and they seemed about to meet in deadly combat.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE GUNMAKERS' REBELLION.

We left Claudia Bennington and Killough in the midst of an interview which was painful to the girl in the extreme. The outlaw had made an offer of marriage, and, being rejected, had declared that she should become his wife anyhow. As a last chance he had said that if she would marry him quietly, Dunstan Hughes should go back to the East and save Edgar

Wheaton from the gallows; but if this chance was rejected, she should become his wife without her consent.

It was a terrible position for Claudia. Turn which way she might there was only misery and desolation. Her lover waited in his cell, sentenced to death, for her to bring Hughes back to save him from an unjust, disgraceful fate. If Killough told the truth she now had the chance to do this—by sacrificing herself.

Should she decline to make the sacrifice, Killough vowed that she should become his wife just the same. In any case it seemed that she was doomed, and it remained to be settled whether she should go to her fate willingly.

If she did this Edgar Wheaton would be saved!

The girl gazed at Killough as one looks at a hideous serpent which has fascinated her. This man was her master; his will was her law, simply because she was powerless to resist; no Circassian maiden was ever more completely a slave, in the harem of the Turk who had purchased her, than was Claudia Bennington. The right of might was Killough's and mercy was unknown to him.

As he sat there, his expression varying from a cold sneer to a menacing scowl, and then, again, to a smile which was not more agreeable, he held her gaze fast. She could not look away; those bold, lawless eyes bound her in a spell.

Killough grew impatient at last.

"Well, well—your answer!" he exclaimed.

"Sir, I beg that you will be merciful—"

"Stop!" he sharply interrupted. "We have gone all over this ground; I tell you I will not let mawkish sentimentality stand between me and the only woman I ever loved. You shall be my wife! Will you come willingly?"

"Mr. Killough," was the faint reply, "I cannot—dare not!"

"Dare not!"

"Yes."

"What do you mean by that? Ha! why do I ask? You fear me—hate me—loathe me! I affect you much as a hideous rattlesnake would. Verily, this is good news for a groom-elect, but it don't embarrass me. I know the ways of women; I know my power. Girl, come with me!"

If he was not embarrassed he was angry, as his white face showed. He had arisen with a scowl on his face. He now grasped her wrist and compelled her to go outside the tent. He pointed to the top of the cliff.

"Look yonder! See the sentinel who marches with his rifle ready for use; see the one beyond him, and the third; see the line which encompasses the valley. Those are my men; I am their master as much as though I were a king. There are thousands of men who acknowledge my rule as loyally as do those visible men. My followers are to be found in Texas, California, the lumber-camps of Washington Territory, the Hudson Bay region, and every point comprised in that wide area of which these four points are the extremities. These followers number many thousands, and all obey my will. No one dares murmur when I command. This is what I am! Dare you defy me?"

He folded his arms and looked at her with a strange expression. Pride, passion, dogged resolution and sullen anger were to be seen there. This time Claudia did not shiver.

"I know your secret!" she exclaimed.

He started a little.

"What do you mean?" he slowly asked.

"You are more than a lieutenant in the League; you are the leader—the Grand Chief!"

"If this is so," he answered, without a change of countenance, "you see my power. Will you marry me?"

Claudia's gaze wandered from his face. The old feeling returned, and she struggled like one with an evil dream. Mechanically she looked up at the top of the nearest cliff, but hardly had she done so when she started, grew paler yet; her eyes assumed a wild expression; she took one step, tottered, and would perhaps have fallen had not Killough caught her.

"What cunning trick is this?" he rudely demanded.

"Dunstan Hughes!" she gasped. "I saw him!"

The outlaw glanced upward, almost with a startled look.

"Where?"

"On the cliff—beside the sentinel."

"Impossible! No one is allowed near them."

"I tell you I saw two men there, and one was he—Dunstan Hughes. Let me go to him!—let me go!"

She spoke wildly and struggled to break his hold, but he held fast to her and a new glitter came into his eyes.

"You see that I did not lie. Dunstan Hughes is here; I can save you and your Eastern lover, if you will have it so. Fair Claudia, will you marry me now?"

A sudden courage, arising from her excitement, came to the girl. She wrenched her arm from his grasp.

"Never!" she cried, "never. Don't dare to ask me again. Go, and never let me see your face again!"

Unconsciously she had raised her voice sharp-

ly, and Killough looked quickly toward the door to the large tent. What he expected had come to pass. One of the gunmakers stood there; he had seen Claudia forcibly release herself, and heard her raised voice, if not the exact words.

A shade of uneasiness crossed Killough's face. He knew that all the prisoners would rush out, and though they had no weapons of the usual kind, they might fall upon and kill him then and there, or force him to an ignominious flight which would ruin his reputation.

Clearly, the sooner he went, the better.

"Miss Bennington, I will give you a short time to meditate on this matter, but I shall come again. My will is unalterable; see to it that you do not refuse me again. Death, alone, can thwart me!"

With this ominous farewell he turned and walked away. His mind was not at ease. He heard the gunmakers behind him; he heard their angry voices; but pride forbade undue haste, and he would not look around.

He expected pursuit, but none was made. He ascended the stone stairway, however, with a heart far lighter than when he left Claudia. He looked backed, and a sneer moved his lips.

"They are in a spasm of indignation," he muttered.

He could afford to sneer then, for he was out of the valley and among his followers. He did not linger there, however, but walked to the outlaw camp, a hundred rods away. This, like the gunmakers' quarters, was a village of canvas, all the places of shelter being tents. Killough entered his own tent, sat down and fell into thought.

When he expressed a contempt for women, in conversation with Starbuck, he had told the truth. Until he saw Claudia it had been long since a fair face had quickened his pulse, but he had yielded as completely now as any sentimental city youth.

An hour later one of his men brought him a note which, he said, the gunmakers had insisted upon his carrying to the lieutenant. The latter read it eagerly, but his brow grew dark and scowling when he perused these words:

"LIEUTENANT KILLOUGH:—Circumstances have made us your slaves. We admit that, and we are prepared to accept our fate and continue to labor for you—on one condition. You know what has occurred to-day. Sir, we cannot bear everything, and we have decided to make a proposal to you. If you will promise to send Dunstan Hughes East to give his testimony, and save an innocent man from the gallows, and will solemnly promise that not one of our women shall be molested we swear to work for you faithfully. Unless such promise is given before another day dawns, we will never do another stroke of work for you."

"Sir, we are desperate. We can endure slavery, but when you rob us of our women you go further than human endurance reaches. We will die before that shall be, for death is a less bitter alternative. Believe us, we are not disposed to deny your power, but we appeal to you in the name of mercy and your own interests. You can secure faithful laborers if you choose, but if you deny our request we quit work to-night never to resume. Where will you find faithful workmen to fill our places?"

"Respectfully yours,

"THE GUNMAKERS."

Down in the valley the prisoners were waiting for their answer, and it came in an ominously short time.

It was brief. Under their own signature Killough had written this graphic reply:

"Your proposal is declined, and you will continue work as usual. Torture sometimes is more persuasive than death. Shall visit you at nine o'clock to-night to receive your promise to keep at work."

Thomas Garrison read this communication aloud, and then his face flushed.

"By heavens! the scoundrel does not even think us worthy of civil reply."

"I'll eat my rifle," said Long Dave, "ef I don't chaw that creetur' all ter pieces some day."

"There is a terrible significance," said Bennington, "in that terse sentence: 'Torture is sometimes more persuasive than death.'"

"So the 'tarnal reptile would tortur' us, would he?" muttered Dave, lugubriously. "Friends, it'd been a heap better fur us all ef we'd been born forty year later!"

"You have heard the reply," added Garrison, in a ringing voice. "We have had our petition refused. Now for a vote. Who is in favor of our yielding tamely to that wretch?"

Not a voice was raised.

"Who is in favor of a revolt, stout, decisive, unwavering—if need be, fatal to us all?"

"I!" answered every gunmaker, at once, and their voices had a ring of stern, heroic, resolution.

"Let the creetur's come!" added Long Dave. "We ain't got so much ez one revolver, but the tools o' our trade kin be made disastrous ter the enemy. My nat'ral choice in the case would be ter run like sin, but next ter that I enjoy fightin'. Let the mis'ble skunks come; it'll take ten on 'em ter kill me, an' when the job is done thar'll be nine o' the ten defunct, by thunder!"

The same spirit pervaded all the gunmakers. They had taken their stand, and there would be no wavering. True, the enemy was overwhelmingly their superior in numbers, possession of weapons, and everything else, but what of that?



They did not expect to win; they could not win if every prisoner was fully armed, for World's End was full of Killough's followers.

They had not rebelled with the thought of winning. No; their sole purpose was to sell their lives as dearly as possible. When the fight was over it was believed that not one of them, man or woman, would be left alive.

These stern-faced, unfaltering men had planned to save the weaker members of their party at a fearful cost, and they coolly awaited the arrival of Killough and his outlaws.

#### CHAPTER XIX.

##### TWO PAIRS OF IRON HANDS.

THERE was a bank of light against the dull, grim clouds; a sudden glitter as of an erratic star, soon joined by several others; a series of tiny pillars of flame; a dim vision of rugged men, armed to the teeth; a wavering, trembling of the pillars of flame, and then they sunk slowly, irregularly down.

The gunmakers were watching the outlaws descend to the valley. The slaves had been on the alert, and Killough had not kept them waiting. They knew what these varied shapes of light meant, and why the armed men were descending to their prison place.

In utter silence they viewed the outlaws cross the plain. The flickering light of the torches made their forms look grim, dark, forbidding and ominous, but the devoted little band did not waver. They had taken their stand, and intended to maintain it.

They would not yield an iota, and Killough must either grant their demands or lose their services as gunmakers.

The hostile force came to a halt a few yards away.

"Who speaks for you?" Killough asked, curtly.

Thomas Garrison stepped to the front.

"I do, sir."

"Well, what have you to say?"

"We said all in our letter to you."

"And you still stand by it?"

"We do, sir."

"Then you are fools!"

Killough's voice was harsh, but Garrison retained his calmness surprisingly.

"We have taken the only stand open to us, sir."

"And you say that you will do no more work?"

"Circumstances compel us to say that we will not work unless our demands are granted. We ask that Dunstan Hughes be sent East to give his testimony, and save an innocent man from a terrible fate; and we ask your promise that no more of our women shall be molested. Do this, sir, and we will work for you faithfully, unmurmuringly, and with an eye to your interests."

"There is a good deal of humor in your demand, but I am not a joking man. Neither am I weak enough to do what you wish. Your demand is refused."

"Reflect, Lieutenant Killough—"

"Enough! I will not hear you. I shall make no promises, and you will work to-morrow, as usual."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but we shall do nothing of the kind. We have reached a point of desperation, and our stand is taken. We can die, but our women shall not be taken from us. Until you promise, we will do no more work!"

"Fool!" said Killough, harshly, "do you want us to put you to the torture?"

"If one of our number is tortured, it will be when the others are dead. You see us here in a body; we are a unit. True, we are armed only with our gun-making implements, but we are desperate. When the fight is over, none of us, men or women, will be left alive!"

Garrison spoke firmly, and his strong hand grasped a hammer tenaciously. His fellow workmen were similarly armed, and the nervous way in which they handled these primitive weapons told that they were nerved to that point where they longed for the crisis.

"Poor, weak fools!" exclaimed the outlaw, "do you suppose that I have schemed for years to get this work in operation, only to be baffled now by a rebellion of my captives? Don't think it! You will work on, or be subjected to tortures which will appall you."

"Inhuman monster!" Garrison exclaimed.

"Now you talk sensibly."

"Man, give me a weapon, and fight me hand-to-hand, if you dare!"

"Fight with a slave? Hardly!"

"You are a coward!"

"Speak on, if you wish."

During the conversation Killough had frequently glanced toward one side, as though his gaze sought some particular object. He evidently saw it at last. His eyes suddenly glittered; his tall form grew more erect; his hand flew to his revolver. At the same moment a woman's scream arose on the air. Killough fired three revolver shots. His wild body-guard advanced three paces, and each and every man presented his rifle, the hammer up, the muzzle bearing upon the gunmakers.

"The women!—the women!" cried one of the prisoners.

There was a confused disturbance at one side. "Hold!"

It was Killough's voice in a tone of sharp command, and for a moment even the gunmakers were led to obey mechanically.

"Stand where you are, all of you!" he added. "Give me obedience for a moment, and then if you will have a disturbance, come on. Take notice of what I have done. You defied me—made preposterous demands—rebelled. It was time for me to show the iron hand; I have done so. I have taken Claudia Bennington prisoner under your very eyes!"

This was only too true. While the crafty outlaw had engaged the attention of the men, four of his followers, acting according to his pre-arranged plan, had secretly made a *detour*, reached the women and seized Claudia. Long Dave Cobb, the only defender shrewd enough to suspect such a trick, had been stricken senseless, and the captive girl carried to the rear of the outlaws.

When this was done Judson Killough believed that he had the game in his own hands.

There was no longer danger that the only jewel among the prisoners would be lost to him by desperate suicide, and for the others he cared not an iota.

Garrison almost reeled as he comprehended the situation; then his voice arose hoarsely:

"Forward, men! Rescue Claudia, or die—"

"Hold!"

Again Killough shouted the command, and his voice was full of imperious energy and confidence.

"Hear me," he added. "Take notice of the fact that every one of you is covered by two rifles. There is system in my arrangement. We are two to one, in a double sense; we are fully armed, and the hammer of each unfailing weapon is up. One touch of our fingers, and every one of you will be dead. But what good will it do you to die now? Claudia is in our power; she is at the rear of our force; she can't commit suicide, nor can you kill her to keep her from my hands. The game is wholly mine. Now, will you die at our hands and leave her without a friend, or will you live for her sake?"

Major Bennington groaned aloud. He and his companions saw that they had been completely outwitted by the cunning outlaw.

There was a momentary silence, broken only by the deep, labored breathing of the excited gunmakers.

"One word more," Killough continued. "I am going to take Claudia to my village, one-fourth of a mile away, but I am not disposed to ill-use her. If you go to work to-morrow, and continue to work faithfully, she shall be treated like a queen. I sacredly promise that. Refuse to submit to my will—refuse to go to work—and the result of your rebellion falls upon her fair head. What is your choice?"

A cool smile of conscious power moved the lips of the outlaw as he faced them. Rarely had he met with a situation which pleased him more than this; never had he felt more confident of success.

Despair had fallen upon the valley slaves. They knew that they were utterly helpless. What would it avail them to sell their lives at the rifles' muzzles while Claudia was a captive? Why should the other women turn their hands against their own lives? If all could not die, better that all should live.

"We yield! we yield!" cried Bennington, almost heart-broken.

"Now you talk sensibly."

"But we may, at least, ask you to leave Miss Bennington here," urged Garrison.

"And give you a chance to repeat this rebellion? No, sir! I need some assurance of your good behavior; I have it, and am not fool enough to yield a point. The girl goes to my village, a pledge that you will henceforth behave yourselves."

"My poor Claudia!" murmured the major, while tears coursed down his furrowed cheeks.

"Why do you lament, old man? Have I not promised to treat her with all possible consideration?"

"Yes, but—"

"Do you doubt my word?"

Bennington did doubt it, but, well aware that the result of such an admission would be upon Claudia's defenseless head, he hastened to deny the fact.

The rebellion was crushed. The most belligerent and reckless of the gunmakers no longer thought of resistance, and with all the civility that they could muster, Garrison and Bennington proceeded to say to Killough the little that remained unsaid. The usual shrewdness of the outlaw did not desert him now, and he was careful not to abuse his power.

He reiterated that as long as the men worked faithfully Claudia should be well treated, and even consented to the major's request that he should be allowed to visit her at intervals. Then came the farewell, though only Bennington was allowed to see her. He went among the outlaws, and when they were sure that he was unarmed, was allowed to bid her an affectionate good-by.

Then the armed men marched away with her in their midst, and the unhappy gunmakers were

left to their new desolation. Truly, their rebellion had borne bitter fruit.

Killough was triumphant, but he curbed his exultation, and was very courteous and polite to Claudia. He assisted her up the stone stairway, and conducted her toward the village, as the quarters of his band were termed.

"I am sorry to see you so despondent," he observed.

"What else can you expect?" she returned, wearily.

"Have I not promised you good usage?"

But am I not a prisoner?"

"Yes, the prisoner—if you will—of a man who loves you devotedly; who will shed his blood for you; who sees in you the bright star of his existence; and who will be ever kind to you."

Uttering such pledges, and really believing them for the time, he conducted her to a tent in the village.

"Here is your home," he said. "This place has been especially prepared for you, and, though a prisoner, you will here be a queen. True, you will be closely guarded, especially at night—I shall place a sentinel before the tent—but you will be kindly treated—if you are sensible!"

There was a significance about the last words which did not escape her notice, but she did not dwell upon it. Strange as it may seem, she was fast becoming reconciled to the new order of things.

It had occurred to her that, situated as she would be, there would be a chance for her to look for Dunstan Hughes—perhaps to gain speech with him. A reaction might come later, but, for the time, she was glad that Killough had seen fit to bring her there.

The ruling passion had never been stronger; her thoughts were all of her imperiled lover in the East, and the chances of saving him.

Killough heard a slight sound behind him. It was like a footfall. A frown came to his face—had any of his men dared intrude there? He turned; he saw another man dimly.

More than this he did not see. A terrible weight, like the force of a lightning bolt, seemed to fall upon his head; a host of electric sparks flashed before his eyes; he reeled, grasped blindly at the air, and fell to the ground as insensible as the clods beneath him.

He recovered after a period of oblivion, and sprung at once to his feet. His head was far clearer than was to be expected, and his active mind at once grasped the facts of the case; he knew that he had been struck down by some hostile hand—and the pain in his head led him to believe that he was not the only man who had "an iron hand," to use his own term, in the valley.

Almost wildly he looked about for Claudia; she was gone. He rushed from the tent and swept a glance about; she was nowhere to be seen.

Furious with anger he alarmed the village. The several tents were searched, but in vain. His men all declared that they had not seen the girl, nor did they know who had struck down their leader. It was a startling mystery to Killough.

"Pursue! pursue!" he shouted. "Search every rock and recess. She must be found, and the man who took her from me shall die a death of torture! Away, men, away! They shall be found if I have to tear the mountains to pieces to do it!"

#### CHAPTER XX.

##### THE NIGHT PROWLER.

It was with feelings of great relief that Blanche, Walt and Somerville, watching from their elevated covert, saw a conflict averted in Paradise Valley, but indignation arose to fever-pitch when they saw Claudia taken away by the outlaws—they recognized her, even at that distance.

"Great snakes!" ejaculated the ranger, "don't I wish I's down thar! I'd trounce the hides off'n a few, ef I got wiped out fur it right arter. I ain't much on the fight, but I carry a magic rifle—ef I's ter lift it, it will shoot straight, anyhow."

"Walt, Miss Bennington is being taken from the valley," said Somerville, suddenly. "Let us go out and attempt her rescue at once."

The veteran shook his head.

"My will is good enough, but we must wait Black Hills Ben's say-so. He's out scoutin'; he'll see all that's goin' on; an' ef thar's a chance ter rescue her, or need ter sell our lives fur her, he'll let us know. We must leave it ter him. Princess, I hope ye don't think me a mean coward?"

"I know you to be a hero, and as wise as you are brave," replied Blanche, sincerely.

"You are right, as usual, Walt," added Somerville.

"Thank ye, both. I'd feel a good bit stirred up in'ardly ef you thought I's a coward. I've seen that sort o' cattle 'fore now. Knowed a feller onc't who got scared at his own shadder, in a moonlight night, an' run away from it. In the course o' natur' it follered, an' they had a race o' more than ten mile, nip an tuck; but as



the moon rid on in its starry trail the shadder got short, an' seemed ter gain. The feller was 'bout played out, an' his breathin' was like a disconnected volley o' muskitry, so he turned an' grappled with his pursuer. It may sound overdrawed, but that chap had a rough-an'-tumble fight with his shadder, fu'st one bein' on top an' then t'other, lastin' an hour, an' then Jim—that was his name—got his enemy down an' held him. 'Twas his idee ter wait fur the rest o' the boys, but jest afore sun-up the shadder slipped out o' his grasp an' got away."

"Claudia is taken from the valley," said Blanche.

"Yes. Hadn't we better return to the main room, Walt? Ben Todd may be in?"

"In the course o' natur', one on us ought ter stay hyar an' keep the lookout. S'pose you do it, Hugh."

"I am anxious to go out with the scout, if he comes for help," replied Somerville, hesitatingly.

"Go on, then, an' call me ef thar's a grain o' excuse fur it. I feel like tightin', too. My blood feels stagnant, an' I reckon I've got ter exterminate a tribe or two o' red creatur's afore I'm wal ag'in."

Blanche and Hugh walked back to the main room. The former was greatly troubled in regard to Claudia, but the possibility that Hugh would have to go out and meet fresh dangers, kept her from expressing all she felt. His impetuous nature could be easily fired, and rashness was the enemy of success. Blanche was bearing up bravely, but, though maidenly modesty prevented the confession, she felt that if harm came to Somerville she would no longer try to be hopeful, nor care to live.

Conversing earnestly as they went, they soon reached the main room. Windfoot and their prisoner were there, and the latter had evidently abandoned his taciturn manner. He was using his tongue eloquently.

"It ain't reasonable that you should stick ter these folks, Injun. You're red; they're white. That ain't logic. Blood is blood, anyhow. What if you be a Pawnee? You're Injun, ain't ye?"

"Me no darn Sioux!" Windfoot asserted.

"Land o' love! it's only the difference in name. Sioux and Pawnee—all one."

"Not one, by darn! Don't you say they be!" and Windfoot handled his knife threateningly.

"All right—all right," was the hasty reply.

"No offense, my red friend; I mean you wal, sure. But all the Injuns, o' all tribes, is with our League. Why not you? 'Tain't natural for red an' white ter mix."

"Den why you mix wid Sioux?"

"Eh? What? Oh, wal, that's diff'rent," protested the prisoner, a good deal confused by the Pawnee's question.

"You bes' talk no more; you fool, but can't make fool o' me. You stop your tongue. You t'ink you pull wool over Injun's eyes, an' he let you go 'way. Game won't work, by darn! You stay here—try run 'way, Windfoot shoot you like he do wolf. No talk more!"

The Pawnee's voice was emphatic and Blanche and Somerville walked into view feeling that in Windfoot they had a companion to be trusted in every way. Somerville began explaining the situation to him, but the Indian suddenly turned away, caught up his rifle, ran to the interior opening of the passage and dropped on one knee. The gunmaker imitated his actions in part, and then listened intently.

He could hear nothing.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Somebody step. We bes' no talk."

Somerville followed this advice, but listened again. Blanche waited anxiously, while the prisoner's eyes glittered with hope. Footsteps became audible even to Somerville and Blanche; they came nearer; all were on the alert and prepared for trouble; and then Claudia Bennington appeared.

A greater surprise could hardly have been vouchsafed, or one more welcome, but the presence of Black Hills Ben just behind her showed how it had come about. The girls hastened to each other's arms, while Somerville impulsively wrung the scout's hand.

"Praise from me to one like you would be a farce," he said, "but you have done a good deed—a great deed."

"Tol' ye we could depend on him," said the quiet voice of Wild West Walt, as that person appeared from the background. "Partner, you did the job up in chain-lightnin' style, by sixty; I only hope that you trounced a few hundred o' the mixed heathen, while you's about it. 'Twould 'a' been a good act ter deperlate the hull blamed brigade o' sealawags."

"I contented myself with knocking Killough senseless," answered the scout, quietly. "Killough certainly didn't hold his captive long; I had my eye on the fellow, and the moment he conducted her to the tent I knocked him over."

"Didn't you kill the sarprint?"

"Not to my knowledge. I left him senseless, brought Miss Bennington hurriedly away from the outlaw quarters, and here we are."

"I should say so, by hickory. You've got a knack o' rescuin' fair captives. Hugh, whar are we? I expect ter git left when the female sex is passeled out, but with yer style o' statute—that's French fur 'igger—you orter run a

good race. Don't neglect the pooty gals, lad, or you'll lose the honey an' dew o' life."

The veteran's face beamed with satisfaction and, indeed, every one was in good spirits save the captive outlaw. He looked at the others sourly, but they gave him no attention. When once greetings were over there was a good deal to say, and Claudia related all that had transpired in Paradise Valley. The account was not encouraging, and the least cheerful feature was the fact that Judson Killough had taken such a violent fancy to her. Actuated by a double motive, he would leave no means untried to bring ruin to the little party.

It was late when the scout suggested that they all retire, but the idea was so sensible that it was at once carried out.

The prisoner was more securely tied; the two girls found good quarters in one of the balconies of rock above; and the men of the party lay down in the main room. Black Hills Ben and Walt decided that no guard was needed, but both took position near the passage, where the least disturbance would awaken them.

Somerville was very weary, and he fell asleep quickly.

Several hours of peaceful rest followed, unbroken by dreams or more practical troubles, but he finally awoke and found it hard to sleep again. His mind dwelt persistently on their situation, and he found it gloomy enough. Had it not been for Blanche he would have faced the danger as a brave man may, but her peril worried him despite all his efforts to be stoical.

He had supposed that all his companions were asleep, but Ben Todd suddenly, yet silently, arose, rifle in hand. The decaying torch cast its gleams on his face, and showed his gaze fixed on the passage intently.

His whole appearance impressed Somerville as that of a man who knows that danger is near.

The scout glided into the passage. Almost instantly Somerville arose, grasped his rifle and started after him. He had thought to make his movements noiseless, but Ben heard him at once and paused.

"Move like a ghost!" cautioned the scout. "There is some one prowling in the passage!"

"An enemy?"

"It can't well be anybody else. Follow me, if you will, but beware of making a noise. We must not let the fellow escape; he will carry the alarm to Killough."

Thirty yards further they went with all possible caution, and then the scout paused and crouched down. Somerville could then distinctly hear the prowler. He was advancing, but with caution. Black Hills Ben laid his hand warningly upon his companion's arm. The gesture seemed to call for utter silence, and Somerville scarcely ventured to breathe as he awaited the result of the adventure.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE SPY AT THE TENT.

SOMERVILLE'S bearing was acute enough so that he soon discovered that only one person was astir, and the matter seemed to grow less serious. Black Hills Ben could easily dispose of him alone; the gunmaker had often done as much himself during his Western experience. His chief anxiety was not to interfere with the scout's plans.

Nearer yet came the prowler, and then Ben arose and leaped upon him like a tiger. Perhaps his hand found the prowler's throat, for no cry was uttered; the only audible sounds were those of the struggle. The outlaw was certainly making a stout resistance.

The gunmaker stood ready to lend his aid, but in the darkness he could not tell one man from the other. Suddenly both fell to the hard ground, and the fight seemed at an end.

"Have you a match?" Black Hills Ben quietly asked.

"Yes."

"Light it."

"Wait! Me bring torch."

It was Windfoot's voice, and as Somerville turned he was surprised to see both the Pawnee and Wild West Walt—or, at least, two dark forms which he believed to be theirs.

"So thar's been a dispute?" said Walt. "I expected it; in the course o' natur' sech things will come, though I dunno why. I've had a heap on 'em. They begun afore I was three days old, when the servant gal larruped me with her slipper; but I had my revenge afore a week later, by stonin' her an' her lover as they stood by the gate. Hit 'em both, and nigh about got sent ter the Inform School, but was let off on account o' my tender age. I've had some thousand disputesence, by actooal count. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"Here comes the Pawnee with the torch."

"He did it quick—good errand-boy."

Windfoot held the light above the scene. The prowler was still there, and not likely to go away of his own act. The light fell upon a coarse, brutal face, but the dangerous element in the man was gone; he had found death in the passage. The scout pointed to the hilt of a knife projecting from the man's side.

"He fell upon his own weapon. He tried to

stab me, but I tripped him just in time, and luck went dead against him."

"I have seen his face before," said Somerville; "I have seen him in the valley with Gregerson's party."

"That settles his position, but not so with ours. One of the gang has found the passage—though he may not have had the least suspicion that we were here—and the e is no knowing how many others are working a definite ciew. Walt, I leave you and Somerville to dispose of this body, which you can do for the time in some recess. Windfoot, follow me."

He glided away, followed by the Pawnee, while the other two men paid attention to the dead prowler. His fate gave them no regrets, for he was not only one of Killough's men, but his face was that of a scoundrel.

When their work was done they returned to the main room, convinced by the silence that they need not fear immediate danger, but well aware that it would not do to sink into apathy. One of the outlaws had found his way in, and others might do the same thing at any time.

Danger seemed determined not to allow them to forget its existence for a moment.

What little sound had been made in the passage had not been sufficient to arouse Blanche and Claudia, and the outlaw prisoner slept, or seemed to sleep, in his old position. Walt and Somerville waited patiently, and Ben finally returned.

"All quiet," he reported. "There is no sign of further trouble, and I am inclined to think our prowler was some fellow who found the passage by chance, and explored without any idea of what lay beyond. In brief, this experience is only significant for the fact that it shows what others may do. If Killough makes the search I expect him to, he is liable to find the entrance."

"And what then?"

"Then it remains for him to take us," the scout replied, tapping the barrel of his rifle significantly.

"He will get his fill if he tries it," retorted Somerville.

"He can't do it alone," added Walt, "but he's got an ally we can't trounce in the long run, I'm afeard."

"Who is that?"

"Starvation!"

"There is sense in that," the scout admitted, "and to-morrow night we must make a raid on Killough's provisions. We have enough of some things; in other respects we are short."

"Mortal short," the veteran coincided.

"We won't lose time talking about it now," said Black Hills Ben. "To your blankets, men, and get what sleep you can; we need to be fresh in case of an emergency, and Windfoot will guard the entrance."

Somerville again lay down, and, much sooner than he expected, lost consciousness in sleep. When he awoke the top of the rock was gray with the rays of daylight which stole in through the crevices. The scout and Walt had prepared breakfast, as it was not safe to have a fire after night departed, and when Blanche and Claudia came down from the balcony, they found no occasion for their culinary skill. There was enough for all, "an' some ter spare," as the ranger gravely remarked when he vainly offered the Pawnee a taste of his tobacco.

Windfoot reported all quiet outside. He had watched well and closely, but Killough had evidently postponed the search until day.

Each of the fugitives improved the chance to ascend to the top of the rock, now that there was light outside. Those who had thought Tombstone Rock a curious place, in the past, had little suspicion of its greatest wonders.

In shape it was an irregular cone, hollow to the broad cap in which it ended, and fitted up inside by Nature with balcony after balcony, and ledge after ledge. By means of these, ascent was comparatively easy, and the frequent, but narrow, crevices by the way gave ample light.

Somerville, standing near the top and looking out, thought he had never seen a more dismal place. Lake Desolation lay under the yellow sun without a perceptible ripple. Never before had he realized how still the surface of water could be. Dark, barren rocks walled it in at almost every point. In the distance luxuriant vegetation was to be seen, but near the shores of the lake not even a blade of grass broke the monotony of that dreary line. The lake had been well named; it was a place of desolation.

Looking to the west he saw the outlaw village. There the view was very different. The abundance of trees and bushes, and the green carpet of grass, dotted with the white tents—all this was pleasant and agreeable.

But there was more to be seen. There were more men in the village than usual; the outlaws had gathered in a body. Why they were there it was not hard to surmise. One man was addressing the others—plainly, Killough was giving directions for the grand search for his escaped prey.

Such was the case, and all day long the outlaws' movements were watched by the hiding fugitives. Killough did his best to keep his threat, and his men went far and wide through World's End—even beyond the Basin. All this



was encouraging; it showed plainly that the real refuge of the little party was not suspected. True, the shore of Lake Desolation was searched, but no one came near Tombstone Rock, and no one entered the passage.

Besides keeping an eye on the outlaws, the fugitives also gave some attention to the gunmakers. Work was going on there as before. It was not at all likely that those in the valley knew of Claudia's escape, and they believed they were doing their part to prevail on Killough to keep his pledge.

The day wore on; the sun went down; night again fell.

There was more or less uneasiness on all hands among the fugitives. Claudia often sighed unconsciously, and they knew she was thinking of her lover in the East and wishing to see Dunstan Hughes. Next to her, Somerville and Windfoot were the most uneasy. This inactivity fretted both; neither had a nature which made it easy to rest under such circumstances in perfect content.

Somerville read the Pawnee's mind and seized a chance to speak with him privately. The result was that Windfoot soon went to Black Hills Ben, and asked if he could take the gunmaker and go out on a scout. The request was at first refused, but the Indian was persistent; he carried his point.

The two men waited until some hours after dark, and then slipped away without the knowledge of Blanche or Claudia. They were soon near the entrance. Without mention having been made of their intentions, it was understood that they would separate there. Each had an object in view, but one so unimportant that he did not care to speak of it.

Neither could be a great while away, however, for the scout intended to make an effort to secure supplies from the outlaw stores, at a later hour.

They separated, and each went his way.

Somerville moved along in the most retired place he could find, enjoying the fresh air, the open, though clouded, heavens, and wild scenery, as only one of his temperament can. Taking care not to go near the outlaw village he wandered about for some time, guarding against any collision with the enemy.

At last he found himself beside the trail, which, leaving Killough's quarters, wound around through World's End and led to the land of the Sioux. He had hardly come to a halt before the sound of approaching horses warned him to use caution. He pressed closer to the rock and waited.

A moment more and a score of riders appeared, moving toward the outlaw village. Owing to the darkness, he could make out but little concerning them until they were abreast his covert; then he saw that all were Indians, while one, who rode at the front, was bravely tricked out as a chief.

Somerville remembered Sweeping Eagle and his lost captive, and wondered if this visit did not have especial significance. He was so impressed that, when they had gone on, he meditated for awhile and then, himself, glided carefully toward Killough's quarters.

Even then he was not fully decided, for the idea in his mind was a reckless one, but he found the way so clear that his purpose received new strength. He distinguished Killough's tent by the flag which floated over it, and, dropping on his hands and knees, crept to its rear.

He could hear voices inside; he made a slight cut with his knife in the canvas, and peered through it.

Killough and Sweeping Eagle were there. The latter's face was angry, but he was quietly listening while the outlaw lieutenant spoke.

"You are not the only one who has been unlucky," Killough was saying. "I've had an experience just like yours, and my beauty was stolen by the self-same men who robbed you of Blanche."

"Where are these men?" the chief angrily asked.

"The devil knows; I don't."

"Where should they be, if not on their way south?"

"I believe they are still in World's End. My men have pretty thoroughly searched the country south, and, besides, none of our horses are gone. Depend upon it, they are still near at hand, and I am going to find them."

"Sweeping Eagle will send for his young men, and every foot of the mountains shall be searched."

"Do so. The eagle eyes of the Sioux will soon find them."

"Black Cloud, I have sworn that I will have the white maiden whom you call Blanche, and it shall be so."

"I say the same of my enchantress—the queenly Claudia."

"Blanche is not like a queen, but she is as sweet as the opening bud of the rose. Black Cloud, we will join hands, and our eyes shall be sleepless until we find these maidens."

"I'm with you to the death," Killough replied, quickly.

At this moment the sentinel appeared at the tent-door, and spoke a few words to Killough which Somerville did not overhear. The out-

law at once replied. "Let him come in!" and another white man entered the tent. He was young, and by no means a ruffian to look at; he looked wild and reckless, but not hardened, like the rest of the band.

At first sight of his face, however, Somerville started; he had seen a resemblance there which at once aroused all his interest. He had never met the man before, but he bore a striking resemblance to a pictured face he had seen.

A suspicion flashed upon the spy which made him hug the tent still closer, and instinctively grasp his knife.

"Chief," said the lieutenant, turning to Sweeping Eagle, "will you excuse me a moment, while I speak with this man?"

"Say on," the Sioux answered. "Sweeping Eagle is in no hurry, and while you talk he will think."

"Thank you, chief."

Killough turned to his follower. The latter looked a little uneasy, but met his superior's gaze firmly.

"Birch, you have been a faithful man," said the lieutenant, abruptly.

"I think I may safely say I have, sir."

"You are also an intelligent man."

"You compliment me, lieutenant."

"Would you like an office with the League?"

Birch's eyes brightened.

"I would, indeed," he quickly answered.

"You can have it on one condition, and that is faithful obedience to my orders and devotion to my interests."

"All this I gladly promise, sir."

"As Joe Birch or as Dunstan Hughes?"

The cool, deliberate question made two men start. One was Birch; the other was Hugh Somerville.

The latter saw his suspicions confirmed. From the first he had seen the resemblance, for he had thoroughly studied the picture in Claudia's possession. At last he saw the long-sought man, and he promptly made a resolution. He would take Hughes back to the cave, a prisoner, or come to grief in the undertaking. It was a desperate chance, but one not to be missed.

Even as he made this resolution, however, a hand was placed roughly upon his shoulder, and a deep voice demanded:

"Hullo! critter, what be you doin' here?"

The spy looked up quickly. One of the outlaws was standing over him, peering suspiciously into his face. He was discovered.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### DUNSTAN HUGHES.

A SUCCESSION of thoughts went shooting through Somerville's mind. This man who had challenged him was undoubtedly one of Killough's men, and unless he could be silently disposed of, trouble—perhaps death—was before the gunmaker. It occurred to the latter, however, that there was so far nothing to prove that the outlaw suspected who he was.

The fact that he had been detected listening at the lieutenant's tent was reason enough why a faithful follower should challenge him, even though the latter might suppose him one of his own comrades.

Whether he did or not was an important question, for on the outlaw's state of mind depended Somerville's chances. The man must be promptly disposed of; to do this the gunmaker must regain his feet; and he would not be allowed to do this tamely if the outlaw suspected the truth.

And it was an almost vital matter to dispose of him *silently*.

All this flashed through the adventurer's mind, but there was only a brief pause before he answered:

"I mean no harm, pardner."

As he spoke he began to scramble to his feet, watching keenly as he did so. If the outlaw offered to strike, his tactics must be changed.

"Mebbe Killough wouldn't b'lieve you!" growled the unknown. "Spies ain't agreeable, an' I reckon he'd tell you so right ter the p'int. Who be you, anyhow?"

Additional suspicion was in the outlaw's voice. The spy was on his feet, and the two were face to face. Perhaps, even in the darkness, the ruffian was impressed by the fact that Somerville was not like the lawless characters who followed the fortunes of the League.

"This is who I am!"

As Somerville spoke his left hand darted forward, and the fingers closed over the outlaw's throat. It was a tenacious grasp, intended to prevent an alarm, and the gunmaker followed it up by swinging his other arm around the man. The latter bounded like a startled deer. He had not been soon enough to foil these rapid movements, but he saw his danger now. He tried to sound an alarm; the words were shut off by the suffocating grasp of Somerville's hand. Wild with pain and rage, he grappled with his audacious assailant.

A desperate fight began.

Under ordinary circumstances Somerville would have had no fears as to the result. He was young, strong and experienced, but if he could not prevent an alarm, all these qualities would go for nothing.

It was a furious struggle, and Somerville ex-

pected every moment to see Killough and his men come rushing out. To avoid this he seized every opportunity to press his opponent away from the tent. He began to feel more confident; huge as was the frame of the outlaw, he was not a dangerous enemy. If he was strong, he certainly was not quick, and the pressure on his throat was telling upon him.

The gunmaker watched his chance, caught his enemy in a skillful "lock," and laid him upon his back. Another moment and a heavy knee was on the fellow's breast, and Somerville touched his neck with the blade of his knife.

"Be silent!" he exclaimed, sternly. "Utter one word of alarm, and you are a dead man!"

There was a gurgle in the outlaw's throat—no more.

"I am not a butcher," the gunmaker resumed, "and you are safe enough if you use common sense; but if you force me to it, I'll use this knife."

Still no reply, but his late opponent gasped, and then lay very quiet.

"Fainted, by Jupiter! Well, this is uncommon good luck. I'll fix him in a twinkling."

He remembered that he had a small piece of cord in his pocket, and with all possible dispatch he applied this securely to the outlaw's wrists. Next he rolled him into the shade of a small thicket. It was not a safe place to leave him, but the victor's means were limited, and he was very anxious to get back to Killough's tent.

He was determined to go, though he could hardly hope that a second discovery would result as well for him as the first. He was in the heart of the village; his success thus far had been owing to the darkness; and an alarm would bring all the gang upon him in a body.

Nevertheless, he returned quickly to the tent and again lay down at the opening before made.

Killough was speaking.

"Of course I don't care what name you bear among the men," he said, "but if you are prepared to follow the League to the end, I don't see why you need be squeamish about having your own name known; when we have accomplished our great work, and unlimited power is ours, we shall have occasion to be proud, not ashamed. However, you need have no fear; you can remain simple Jack Birch, among the men, to the end of time. But as Dunstan Hughes, I have work for you."

Evidently he had explained something while Somerville was away, for Hughes answered, in a dissatisfied tone:

"I don't like the idea of going East, at all."

"Why not?"

"Well, my record is not perfect there, and enough news might come from the West to fix me."

"You're not a desperate man."

"No, nor an angel."

"I should hope not. Could you really save that Eastern fellow from the gallows, with your testimony?"

"Yes."

"No doubt you would be protected, if you went as a witness."

"I might not."

"See here," suddenly added Killough, "it's not necessary that you should go. When I get the girl again I'll produce you, have you *promise* to go, induce her to marry me, and then—you can make a pretense of going, but, really, stay away. On the whole, I'd much rather Claudia's other lover would hang."

"That's better," Hughes agreed, undisturbed by the thought of such villainy.

"We will do just that way. When she is retaken I'll send for you, and you shall act the cherub, promising all she asks, and I'll get her to marry me to save her precious lover. Ha! not a bad scheme, by my life. Do your part faithfully in this, Hughes, and I'll see that you have an office in the League well worth having."

"You can depend on me, sir."

"Your courage won't weaken?"

"Not a bit!"

Hughes spoke emphatically, and evidently meant all that he said. The promises of the lieutenant had overthrown any scruples he might otherwise have had, and he was willing to do anything the arch-plotter might direct.

Somerville watched him with a heavy scowl on his face. His ready pledge to do all this seemed the more villainous because Nature had done well by him, and he might have been a worthy member of society. Crime had not yet put its indelible seal upon him, as it had on nearly all the outlaws, but he was evidently bound to follow the road to ruin.

The gunmaker's determination to make him a prisoner, if such a thing was possible, grew stronger. Hughes was a few pounds lighter than himself, and, Somerville believed, far from being as strong. If he could get at him alone, capture him, and take him to the refuge in Tombstone Rock, he would certainly be doing a great favor for Claudia. Whether they could hold him was another question.

These meditations were interrupted by a stir in the tent; Killough was dismissing his tool.

Somerville passed partly around the tent and waited. Then Hughes came out and walked away toward the north. His steps were slow



and his manner thoughtful, and he did not hear the soft footsteps behind him, nor see the dark shadow which glided phantom-like at his heels.

He wanted to be alone. New thoughts were in his mind. Killough had aroused his ambition; he saw himself an officer of the League; he saw honors and riches in the hollow of his hand. He was exultant and excited; he wished to be alone. He went beyond the outlaw village and, still thinking deeply, sat down on a rock. Not long did he sit there, however; he was aroused by a touch on his arm, and looked up to see some one standing beside him.

"Come this way, will you, Birch? I want to speak with you."

"What is it?"

The voice was impatient, but not suspicious; Birch believed that he saw one of his comrades, though he could not call him by name, or, indeed, remember his face.

"Something of interest to you, and I want to say it privately," was the reply.

"Well, I'll go."

The outlaw spoke ungraciously, but followed his companion until they reached a point near the outlet of Lake Desolation, the guide in the mean while talking carelessly. When he came to a halt he looked warily about, but the adjacent rocks seemed as deserted as the somber surface of the lake.

"Now speak out!" the outlaw directed.

"I will, and I ask you to pay particular attention to what I say. I have a revelation to make which vitally concerns your interests; I shall even present a case where your very life depends upon your own conduct. I beg that you will think well before doing anything rash. The revelation is—you are my prisoner!"

The last words were spoken with a sudden change of manner, and a revolver was thrust close to Hughes's temple.

"Not a word, or you are a dead man!" Somerville added in a thrilling voice. "I mean business, and one touch of my finger will be fatal to you. Be silent! Yield! Obey these orders and you shall suffer no harm; refuse, and your blood will be on your own head."

The outlaw stared in terror and bewilderment.

"How? What?" he gasped, savagely.

"You are my prisoner. Is that clear?"

"But you—who are you?"

"No matter. All you need understand just now is that if you sound an alarm, or resist, you are a dead man. Do you hear and comprehend?"

"Yes."

"On the other hand, you are perfectly safe while you obey me. I think you will do the latter. Now, go where I direct, and remember that my revolver is at your head—Wait! give me the weapons in your belt."

He deftly relieved the prisoner of these articles, and then, setting his face toward the secret entrance, ordered him to move. Hughes protested, but the logic of the revolver convinced him. He sullenly obeyed.

Somerville drove, rather than conducted, him to the recess, and then along the passage. Each yard that they went made success more certain, and he began to enjoy his triumph. As they neared the main room he let his voice be heard, to guard against possible danger, and then ushered his prisoner in.

Wild West Walt stood there, rifle in hand, and he at once exclaimed in a melancholy voice:

"Glad ter see ye back, by sixty! We're all upshot here. Claudia has disappeared mysterious, an' the very dickens is ter pay!"

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE BATTLE OF THE ROCKS.

THE ranger's revelation was a startling surprise to Somerville. The latter had managed the capture of Hughes with skill, dispatch and imperious authority, doing a good work in the best of style, and he had entered the cave a conqueror. Walt's words came with the force of a blow.

The gunmaker started back, and then flashed a quick glance about. He hoped to see Claudia, but only Walt and Blanche were visible.

"Surely, you were jesting," he said, with the air of one who hopes what he does not believe.

"Wish I was, by hickory!" the veteran answered, "but the facts are ag'in' it. Yes, sir, the gal has vanished like a last year's snow-storm, an' this is a house o' mournin' an' gnashin' o' teeth."

"It is only too true" added Blanche.

"But how—where can she have gone?"

"Our prisoner is also gone. It may be that he escaped and took her with him, but it is the opinion of the borderers that she released him, and went along willingly."

"But why should she do that?" asked Somerville, in increasing bewilderment.

"If she went at all, it was to find a certain man," explained Blanche.

"Great heavens!"

The gunmaker spoke excitedly, and then fiercely added:

"She has gone to find Dunstan Hughes, and here—here is the man, himself! She has put

her life in terrible peril, and all for nothing. Dunstan Hughes is here!"

He gave his prisoner a push, acting as viciously as though the outlaw was the one to blame. It was, indeed, a bitter disappointment. Just as he brought the fellow in, all his work was undone by Claudia's false move.

"Walt Wilkins, take care of this man as though he was a rare diamond—I am going to find Claudia!"

Grasping his rifle more tightly he turned toward the passage, but Walt's voice again broke the silence.

"Hol' on, lad, hol' on! Don't ye go. Orders from Black Hill Ben is strick that it ain't ter be so. He's gone arter our runaway maid, the scout has; an' he left positive orders that when you an' Windfoot come in, you's ter stay in. Ain't I right, Princess?"

"You are right, Walt."

Somerville turned reluctantly away from the passage.

"So be it. I would gladly go out to seek for her, but I recognize the fact that there are those here who are wiser in border craft than I. But, Blanche, I can hardly believe that Claudia went willingly with that ruffian."

"He undoubtedly promised to find Hughes. I saw her talking with him; she doubtless showed him the picture, and he, pretending to recognize it, agreed to lead her to the man she wished to find. Reynaud—the prisoner told me that was his name—was very sociable when the men of our party were not near. He tried to talk with me, and did get me to talk somewhat of my past life—but he was a Frenchman."

Blanche spoke hesitatingly, and with some embarrassment. She regretted having talked with the fellow at all, but the fact that he was a countryman had overcome her aversion to his rags and dirt. It was a revelation to Somerville that either of the girls had talked particularly with the man, but he could easily see how Reynaud could work upon Claudia's feelings.

"She has gone to her doom, anyhow!" he declared.

"Mr. Todd may rescue her."

"Reynaud, of course, will take her at once to Judson Killough, and we can scarcely expect that man to lose his grip on her again. She has made a fatal error of judgment."

"Don't look on the darkest side o' the case," advised Walt. "I've seed good come out o' wu'ss scrapes than this, an' the young woman may eat her breakfast right hyar with us tomorrow. Ef she does, she won't be none the wu'ss for the adventurer, but in the course o' natur' she'll keep the rest on us on the go ter pervide eatables. Thar ain't nobody hez appetites ekul ter heroines. Knowed a gal onc't who captured a Kimanche warrior in fa'r fight, an' she did nothin' but eat fur the next month. The clatter o' her knife an' fork was like the playin' o' cymbals, an' the racket scared all the neighborin' cattle inter a stampede, arter which she died o' famishment."

At the last word the veteran turned abruptly to Hughes.

"So you're the long-lost, long-sought, be you? You're the pearl o' high price fur whom we're wallerin' round hyar in a quicksand o' trouble, be ye?"

The outlaw did not condescend to answer, but the gunmaker replied:

"He is unquestionably Dunstan Hughes."

"Reckon you're 'bout right; he looks like the picture, anyhow. So you're one o' the Killough gang, be ye, young feller? Pooty comp'ny you keep, by hickory!—an' you're a decent-lookin' feller, too. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"I choose my own company," the prisoner surlily replied.

"You show 'tarnal poor judgment. I must say. Wouldn't trust ye ter pick out no chum fur me. Youn will bring ye ter sorer some day, sure's you are born. I may say they hev, now."

"I've got out of a good many scrapes," observed Hughes, defiantly, "and I reckon I shall get out of this."

"Think ye bear a charmed life, hey? Knowed a feller jest like ye onc't, who s'pected ter live forever. He'd fit Injuns, outlaws, pirates, cannibals, thugs; an' sorts o' wild beasts, snakes, fishes an' epidemical diseases; but he finally got laid out by a single coil o' rope. He put his head inter it out o' bravado, but soon found he'd put his foot inter it, also, so ter speak. He an' the rope had a fight lastin' some minutes, but the rope hung on, an' when they cut him down next day, the man with a charmed life was as meek as Moses. You'll hev a dispute with a rope yit, ef ye don't look out, my skeptical neighbor."

"You dare not harm me while Claudia Bennington lives."

"Who talked o' harmin' ye?"

"I understood your meaning."

"Mighty 'cute, ye be. Hugh, see what a crooked mind an' pestifential conscience will do fur a feller. We ain't butchers, creetur', an' ef we was, we'd never think o' killin' a mule fur use in the cutaneous department—which is another term fur the kitchen. Hullo, hyar comes Windfoot; the stray sheep are comin' inter the fold, one by one. Chaw, Injun?"

The Pawnee turned disdainfully away from the proffered tobacco, but Walt saw with satisfaction that he had succeeded in dissipating the clouds from Blanche's face, in a degree with his light talk. The veteran's fancy for her increased daily, and his zeal never waned when there was a chance to help her in any way, great or small.

Somerville explained the new complication to Windfoot, while Walt carefully bound Hughes. He did not intend that *this* prisoner should escape. After all the trouble which had been taken to find him, and especially after Somerville's good work in bringing him in, he must not be lost.

"Though," he added, when the work was done, "I dunno how we're any better off than we was. The gal is gone now, an' I ain't sure but we'll hev ter send *him* arter *her*, next."

"Do you know, Walt, that I have more faith in Pierre Reynaud than you have?" asked Blanche.

"Great snakes! ef you ain't, yer faith would need a telescope big ez a cannon ter make it visible."

"Reynaud and I are both French, slanderer," declared the girl, simulating injured dignity.

"Let him do the braggin', Princess; you ain't no cause ter. In the course o' natur' sech a dirt-kivered varmint must be an unwashed sinner, by hickory!"

"I admit his condition, but, somehow—I am not without a grain of confidence in him."

Somerville approached.

"Walt," he said, in a firm voice, "say what you will, I cannot rest easy here. I must go out. Ben Todd may be in great need, and even my feeble arm will be better than no help in a crisis."

"Yer arm is strong, an' yer head cool an' stiddy, lad, but what ef *you* should get gobbled by them mongrel chaps?"

"Believe me, I will use all possible care, but it worries me to remain idle when one of our party needs, or may need, aid."

"Go, then, go! It may be best, an' I'll be kicked ef I ain't jest all a-tremble ter go out, myself, an' trounce the inemy. But we can't all go; the Pawnee an' I will stay."

Somerville's face brightened. He glanced toward Blanche. Her eyes seemed to implore him to remain, but she thought of Claudia, and her lips were mute. He smiled encouragingly, looked to his rifle and left the cave. Windfoot stretched himself out on the rock at the interior opening of the passage, and lay like a statue. He was all eagerness to go, also, but he had received the scout's orders to remain, and he did not rebel.

The gunmaker emerged from the recess, and then paused on the bank. Lake Desolation lay like a phantom sheet of glass, and its dead silence was gloomier than ever. The young man glanced toward the outlaw village. There, too, silence reigned.

Where was Claudia?—where Black Hills Ben?

Bending low, to make his person visible as little as possible, he glided forward. It was his intention to approach the village by a slight *detour*. Never before in his experience did he feel the need of caution more than then. The fugitives had trouble enough already, and if he added to it, he felt that he would do an unpardonable act.

Half the contemplated journey was finished when the darkness in front of him was suddenly broken for a transient period by a bright flash. The report of a revolver followed. Somerville's form grew erect; he grasped his rifle more firmly; his gaze was fixed on the quarter of interest with eager keenness. Again and yet again came the flash and report; three times the revolver had been fired.

He waited for no more. Heedless of what might lie in the way, he bounded toward the spot like a panther. His blood was up, but back of it all was a coolness which enabled him to reason clearly and coherently.

Only a few yards had he to go, but other shots were fired before the space was cleared. The flashes were of great value to him; he distinguished Black Hills Ben, and, by his side, a slither figure. Opposed to them were several brawny fellows, who could be nothing else than outlaws.

Somerville dashed impetuously into their midst. He had reversed his rifle, and now used it as a club. The first stroke brought down a man, and de pressed upon the others. The scout called his name and sprung to his side. They flung themselves upon the enemy, and gave blow after blow in rapid succession.

If a victory was won, it must be done quickly.

The gunmaker had received two or three blows which he disregarded, but a more powerful one brought him to his knees. A huge outlaw leaped upon him, and they fell to the face of the ledge together. The ruffian was at the top; his hand went up and Somerville saw a knife in his grasp; it fell, but the young man caught the descending wrist and averted the blow.

Then began a struggle for life which Ben Todd was too busy elsewhere to stop. The gunmaker must depend on himself.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

## A STUBBORN OUTLAW.

THE big outlaw gained a position favorable for the use of his strength, and it almost seemed to Somerville as though his bones were being crushed in that powerful grasp. It nerved him to additional efforts, however, and well aware that his only hope lay in his superior agility, he writhed skillfully from the ruffian's hold.

Chance gave him an opportunity, and he was not slow to improve it. Collecting all his energy he flung the outlaw back, dashing his head forcibly against the ledge. Instantly the opposing grasp relaxed; the big frame quivered, and then lay motionless; the blow had stunned the outlaw.

Somerville sprung to his feet.

He was just in time to see Black Hills Ben beat down the only remaining foe.

"Quick!" cried the scout; "take the girl, and get to the refuge. I will follow!"

The gunmaker turned to Claudia, who was looking on in a half-fainting condition, and caught her hand. He saw that she was dressed in male attire, but gave the matter no thought then. He spoke to her; she seemed dazed. The shouts of other men close at hand told of outlaw reinforcements on the way. Somerville swung his arm around the girl's waist and, almost carrying her, beat a hurried retreat.

Every moment he expected to be overtaken, or to see hostile forms spring up in his path, but nothing of the kind occurred. There was a short, rapid flight, and they reached the outlet of Lake Desolation. A few steps more and they were in the passage. Todd was close behind them.

"Go on!" he said, quietly. "I think nobody has seen us, but I will stay here for awhile. Send Windfoot, if he cares to come."

Claudia, however, spoke for the first time.

"Wait!" she said, faintly. "Let me get my breath, and—my senses. What mad thing shall I do next? I have nearly involved you all in ruin."

"We are now out of it all right," Somerville replied, cheerfully.

"I hoped to find Dunstan Hughes. Our prisoner, Reynaud, promised to take me to him. I feel that I have sinned past pardon, but I released him, and followed him from the cave."

"For myself I do not care, but I fear that every one of the outlaws will soon be howling about us. Reynaud knows the secret of our refuge; he will bring them here."

"I do not think he will; he was true to me, anyhow; and he promised to keep our secret."

The darkness concealed Somerville's smile. To him it seemed absurd to put any reliance on the outlaw's promise.

"Shall we go to the cave now?"

"Wait a moment. Let me go to the recess where I found and donned this suit. It is that of the outlaw killed in the passage, and I put it on for additional safety. I shall die of shame if I am seen so improperly clad."

There was real confusion and embarrassment in her voice, and though Somerville did not take such an extreme view of the case, he yielded to her wishes. While she was occupied he stood beside Black Hills Ben. The fact that none of the outlaws had yet appeared was decidedly encouraging. A light step sounded behind them, and Windfoot glided to their side. Neither the firing nor their entrance had passed unheard by him, but he had remained as stoical as ever.

While he and the scout were talking, Claudia reappeared.

"I fear that I have done Blanche an irreparable injury," she said. "For myself I care little—I expected trouble when I came to this wild land—but I had no right to do what would bring fresh perils upon her."

"Don't dwell upon the subject," Somerville answered, in his former cheerful manner. "Present indications seem to show that we need not fear immediate pursuit; the whole case hinges on Mr. Pierre Reynaud. He can betray us if he will, but you say he will not. I hope your opinion is well grounded."

"I have faith in him. He guided me out; took me through the outlaw village, trying to find Hughes; and in several ways guarded me from discovery. He might have betrayed me, and did not."

"That is certainly encouraging."

"He did desert me when danger came. He was conducting me away when we ran upon others of Killough's band. They were suspicious, and he ran away. Then came Mr. Todd, who rescued me."

By this time they reached the main room. In the midst of this conversation, and with so much to make him anxious, he had for the time forgotten Dunstan Hughes; and she entered the cave without a suspicion of what awaited her.

She and Blanche met like sisters long separated. Common danger had made a bond between them, and, brief as their acquaintance had been, they seemed like old friends. Claudia came as a penitent, and she really wondered at her rashness in leaving the cave without a word to her friends, but Blanche refused to regard it as an especial wrong to her.

If she was a woman, she had a nature that was heroic.

Claudia turned away from her and met another gaze. Dunstan Hughes was looking at her intently. The light of the torch fell dimly on his face, giving it a dull, uncertain appearance, but his eyes were gleaming eagerly.

The girl started. She pressed her hand quickly over her heart; her lips parted; the color receded from her face; her eyes dilated; and she gazed like one who looks upon a specter.

Hughes smiled in a sickly way.

"Don't you know me, Miss Bennington?" he asked.

"You—you here?" she gasped.

"Yes, it's I."

She took two quick steps forward.

"It is impossible. No, no; it is Dunstan Hughes—and here?"

"I captured and brought him in, Miss Bennington," interrupted Somerville, who saw that the scene was painful to her.

"At last—at last! Dunstan Hughes, do you know that I have come thousands of miles to find you?"

"Yes, and I'm ready to go right back and save Edgar Wheaton. He's an innocent man, and I'll save him."

"Do you promise this?"

"I do. Why not? He was my friend, and I'm not going back on him; no harm shall come to him while I live."

"Thank Heaven! Then we have only to escape from here and retrace our steps."

Claudia's face had grown bright and happy; the color returned to her cheeks in a swift rush; her eyes sparkled; and she showed in every way how she was devoted to the cause she had espoused.

"I'll certainly do it," continued Hughes, blandly. "I'd been in the States long ago if I'd known I was needed. I'll save Wheaton, sure, and the sooner I set out, the better. Will you hear my plan, Miss Bennington?"

"Your plan? Yes."

"It'll be a hard job for you to get clear of Killough's men, but if I go alone, I can make railroad time. I know the way, and I know the passwords. Wheaton shall not die; I'll start East this hour. Release me, and I'll be ten miles away before another day dawns."

Claudia's face clouded. The proposition, the man's eager air, and the peculiar gleam in his eyes, all impressed her as being suspicious. She glanced inquiringly at Somerville.

"Mr. Hughes," said the gunmaker, curtly, "what of your compact with Killough?"

The prisoner's eager air vanished; his face darkened.

"What compact?" he slowly asked.

"The one by which you agreed to make a pretense of going East, but, really, remain here."

"I—I never made such a compact," Hughes stammered.

"It is false. I heard your treacherous scheme. You were to play into Killough's hands, and enable him to dupe Miss Bennington; but it was arranged that Wheaton should meet his fate. Killough said he would prefer to have him perish on the gallows, and you did not object. The price of your infamy was to be an office in the League, and you were not so deeply attached to Wheaton then!"

Somerville spoke with angry emphasis and scorn, and the outlaw writhed before the accusation. There was nothing but treachery in his heart, and as he saw his cunning scheme go to pieces at one stroke, he was dumfounded and silenced.

"That's plain English," quoth Walt Wilkins, "an' ef thar's any one thing I set a store on, it's words that are to the pint. Polly-distillable words an' injy-rubber sentences will glance off like a blunt ax, but them that's short an' sweet go right home. I reckon you hit the feller in a vital part o' his anathema."

"Have you, indeed, heard all this, Mr. Somerville?" asked Claudia.

"I heard it by listening at Killough's tent."

"Then this man shall not leave my sight."

"Then I'll never say a word for Wheaton!" angrily declared Hughes.

"You will, and shall."

"Not a word will I speak if you force me to go East. Free me, and let me go as I will, and I will save him. Otherwise, tortures shall not wring a word from me."

He spoke defiantly, and his eyes shot ugly glances at those before him.

"You shall, at least, be produced in court," Claudia firmly answered.

"My lips will be mute."

"They may be mute a mighty sight quicker'n you think, you cross-grained cur!" retorted Wild West Walt. "Trouble with you is, you've got too much conceit. You orter hev it trounced out o' ye, by sixty!"

"You dare not do it," Hughes growled.

"Meister," deliberately replied the veteran, "while you remain a pearl o' great price in our case I'm anxious ter save ye from fractur's o' life an' limb, rumbunctious o' the brain, ossification o' the heart, an' similar unpleasantnesses; but when you've testified in court, I think you an' me, an' a good stout switch, kin argue this case o' ourn better than now."

"Bully me all you will," sullenly replied

Hughes. "I am a prisoner, I know, but I won't talk. I feel more like taking life than saving it."

"Bad blood," Walt commented. "He does need a taste o' a switch, wal laid on."

"We waste time with this man," added Somerville, who saw that Hughes's idea of his own importance was steadily increasing. "Let us leave him alone; his mood will improve, perhaps, before he is out of this fix."

They went aside, and at that moment the scout entered. He had left Windfoot on guard, and there was no danger that the passage would be poorly cared for.

"I want to speak with you," the scout abruptly said, addressing Walt and Somerville.

"Is there new danger?" Claudia quickly asked.

"If there is, it is not visible."

"I tremble to think what my indiscretion may bring upon us," the girl added, turning to Blanche.

"Now, don't let your mind run upon what is past and gone," returned Blanche, lightly. "I know the temptation which you had."

"I went secretly because I knew our friends would never agree to the arrangement, and Reynaud promised faithfully to do his best. He tried to do it, too. I am sure, and, unclean vagabond that he is, I am not without hope that he will keep the secret of our refuge."

"I, too, am favorably impressed by him," said Blanche, thoughtfully.

"That reminds me—after we left the cave he asked many questions concerning you; about your history, name, your father, and so on."

"Singular! He asked all this of me, and seemed very much interested. This is singular, and I regret now that I did not turn the tables upon him, and try to learn why he was so curious. I have, of late, heard strange statements about myself. Sweeping Eagle, the white Sioux chief, declared positively that Basil Beauvais was not my father. He told a story that I cannot—will not—believe until I am obliged to, for such belief would be very painful to me; but this talk with Reynaud recalls his statements. Can it be that Reynaud, too, pretends to know something about my history?"

Blanche put her hand thoughtfully to her forehead, and her expression bore out her assertion that the subject was painful, but, just then, Black Hills Ben approached.

"Young ladies," he said, "I have news for you. We have decided upon a hazardous attempt. To-morrow night we rescue the gunmakers and leave World's End, or perish in the attempt!"

## CHAPTER XXV.

## KILLOUGH'S TENT.

"It does seem as though the Evil One has got charge of the whole business, and gone back on us. I can't understand it. Is the World's End bewitched, or what's the matter? The whole thing seems going to the dogs!"

The speaker was Judson Killough. He and Sweeping Eagle were seated together, the day after the events of our last chapters, and though they had sought to drown their sorrows in liquor, the copious draughts had neither helped them out of their dilemma nor made them more amiable.

"It does heat the blue blazes," replied the chief, who did not take the trouble to talk anything but off-hand English when with his partner in crime.

"All these folks are missing, but where are they? They have not left World's End—of that I am certain—and it follows that they are hiding close at hand. But where? I can't well ask if the earth has swallowed them up, in the full sense of the word, for they appear regularly and raise a cyclone, so to speak. Now there was that row last night. We've got several men in the hospital as a result, but our coveted prey walks off as unconcerned as you please."

Killough was a very angry man. He was not of a nervous temperament, and not a man to show excitement extravagantly, but his dark face looked darker than ever; his lips had a stony rigidity, and his eyes glittered ominously.

Sweeping Eagle, more phlegmatic of nature, but less strong of will, helped himself to another drink.

"It's confounded funny," he admitted.

"Here I have any number of old bordermen at my back, and your Sioux are supposed to be perfect bloodhounds on the trail, but none of them can locate our game. Why? Is witchcraft at work?"

"No; it's Black Hills Ben and Walt Wilkins."

"Do your Sioux knuckle under to them?"

"Well, they seem to have done so, thus far," Sweeping Eagle dryly admitted.

"You take it coolly. Are we to be euchered out of those girls? If you care as much for Blanche as you say, you can hardly be willing to lose her. As for the queenly Claudia, I'd have her if I raise the surface of the earth to do it."

"What I depend on most is starvation. If



only we can keep them where they are, hunger will yet drive them out; or, in their efforts to obtain food, we shall get a clew and capture them."

At this moment one of Killough's men appeared and announced that Major Bennington had asked to see the lieutenant, or to have the latter's pledge made good regarding his permission to see Claudia. This message had been expected, and as Killough knew that he must meet the point squarely, he promptly gave orders to have the major brought to his tent.

Sweeping Eagle took the lieutenant aside.

"Suppose that you include Basil Beauvais in that order. I want to hear what he will say about Blanche. If he comes, however, you may expect me to play the stately red skin to the extreme. I was indiscreet when speaking to Beauvais in the valley, and I don't want him to suspect who I really am."

Killough readily agreed, and the waiting outlaw was directed to bring Bennington and Beauvais under a strong guard. Calling the man back after he started away, the lieutenant told him to let Gregerson have charge of the work, and to say to him that he would be responsible for the gunmakers with his life.

"I mustn't have any more escapes," he added, to Sweeping Eagle.

Evidently Gregerson was of the same opinion, for, when Bennington and Beauvais came, they were surrounded by a detachment of outlaws which would naturally have given the impression that the two old men were the most desperate fighters in the world. The white Sioux could not avoid a smile of amusement as he saw the imposing escort.

The prisoners entered the tent. Both were grave and anxious, and when the major swept a glance about the place and failed to see Claudia, his furrowed cheeks grew a shade grayer. He still bore himself with a military air, however, and his manner was firm.

Beauvais was of a more excitable nature, and his nerves had been wholly unstrung by the separation from Blanche. He could hardly imagine a worse fate than that to which she had, as he believed, been consigned, and every hour had been one of misery to him since she had gone away with Sweeping Eagle. There had been remarks made among the gunmakers that his mind and body were both giving way under the blow; certainly, the aged Frenchman was miserable, and he grieved unceasingly.

"Well," said Killough, breaking the brief silence, "I am ready to hear what you have to say."

"Lieutenant Killough," said the old soldier, slowly and impressively, "do you remember the promise you made me?"

"Regarding Miss Bennington?"

"Yes. You said that I should see her often, and that—"

Here he was interrupted by a cry from Beauvais, whose eyes had wandered from Killough's face to that of the white Sioux. He had started nervously and changed color, and he now broke out almost wildly:

"*Mon Dieu!* it is he—it is the kidnapper of my child! Man, what have you done with my Blanche?"

He took three impetuous strides and confronted Sweeping Eagle belligerently, but the latter remained calm.

"I've certainly done her no harm," he replied.

"No harm? Was it no harm to take her away from me?—no harm to compel a delicate girl to go among the heathen Sioux? Man, you are here—where is my child?"

The Frenchman's excitement increased, and Sweeping Eagle tried to calm him. Remembering that he was outwardly an Indian, he assumed an appropriate manner and replied:

"Let the white man rest easy; Velvet Eyes is in no danger. Let the white captain talk with the old man who, like you, asks for his daughter, and then we will speak of Velvet Eyes. Be patient!"

"Dare you ask me to be patient?—you who have stolen my Blanche? Man, you cannot deceive me with all your paint and long speeches. I know you; you are Francois Ayot!"

Sweeping Eagle started, and his face expressed deep annoyance if not dismay.

"The white man is not in his right mind," he managed to answer.

"Don't talk to me!" cried Beauvais; "don't think to blind me with your Indian lingo. You are Francois Ayot, and I know it!"

"Sweeping Eagle knows nothing of the man you name."

"Nonsense! You betrayed yourself when you took Blanche away. I don't wonder that you want to deny your identity; I should, if I was masquerading as an Indian. You are fallen low, Ayot, when you turn renegade!"

Bennington plucked at his companion's sleeve, and whispered a word of caution.

"Let him talk on," interrupted the white chief, curtly. "He is not doing himself any good, I can swear. If you are so concerned to know, Beauvais, I am Francois Ayot. Also, I am the possessor of Blanche. Also, I intend to keep her!"

The renegade had grown angry, and was not

now likely to reveal what he had intended to admit—that Blanche had been wrested from his possession.

"Monster!" the gunmaker exclaimed.

"Anything more?"

"Francois Ayot, what dark plot have you in mind?"

"If to marry the charming Blanche is a 'dark plot,' that is it. I have no other."

"That is enough, Heaven knows!"

"Why do you make such a disturbance? The girl is not your daughter."

"She is not less dear to me."

"Nor to me," the renegade quickly answered.

"And you would make her share your wretched life—give her the companionship of Sioux—ruin her life?"

Beauvais's voice was tremulous with emotion.

"Her life belongs to me, don't it? I saved it that dark night of storm. I have not forgotten how I struggled through the deep snow, fighting a desperate battle with death, in order to reach Prairie Port. I earned a right to her."

"You have no right to doom her to such a life as yours."

"Well, I've got her, haven't I?"

"Heaven help her, yes!"

"Pretty Blanche!" murmured the white chief, evidently bound to be revenged for the severe terms heaped upon him.

Beauvais bowed his head in despair. He felt utterly crushed, and unable to continue the conversation. Where now was hope for Blanche?

Killough's voice broke the brief silence:

"Bennington, you have asked for Claudia. I have that to tell which will be as good news for you as it is bad for me. Claudia has been taken from my hands, and I have no idea where she is. I have reason to believe that Black Hills Ben and, possibly, that villainous Somerville, were the means of depriving me of her."

The major had made a start, and a variety of emotions were depicted on his face—surprise, joy, uncertainty and doubt showed in turn. He now looked at Killough as though he would read his very thoughts.

"This is a strange story you ask me to believe, sir."

"Infernal stranger!"

"How could two men take her away?"

"Not by force, you can safely believe. It was their villainous cunning, aided by prompt action and a surprise."

"Judson Killough, are you telling the truth?" the major gravely asked.

"I am. I swear it. Of what advantage would it be to me to deceive you, since you are a helpless prisoner?"

Bennington believed that he could see possible reasons, but refrained from mentioning them, for Killough's manner seemed to him that of a man speaking the truth.

"I am willing to say," the lieutenant added, "that I am moving heaven and earth to recover her. I believe that she and her rescuers are still at World's End, and I am not to be defeated. I shall have her back, and, when I do, you shall see her."

The speaker did not think necessary to add that, with the co-operation of Dunstan Hughes, he had arranged a scheme by which he hoped to make Claudia become his wife without opposition; a scheme as treacherous as his own dark nature.

The major did some rapid thinking and close calculation, and he was so impressed by the outlaw's ill-concealed irritation that he accepted his statement as true. Claudia had been rescued, and there was still hope.

He promptly decided to do anything to anger his chief captor further. If Black Hills Ben was near at hand, there was no knowing what reaction might occur in favor of the gunmakers. The scout was brave, experienced and fertile of expedients, and he might yet surprise Killough.

Decidedly, the best way was to act moderately, and not bring any new hardship upon the valley prisoners.

"I accept your explanation," he said, after a thoughtful pause, "and will return to the valley and encourage the gunmakers to go on peacefully. I trust that you will give me credit for this."

"I will, by Jupiter!" Killough quickly replied.

He had good reasons to be pleased, and, under the impulse of the moment, and with the fact in mind that the major was not only Claudia's father but a military man, he was about to offer the bribe of an office in the League, but his cold caution returned and he checked the impulse.

"We are ready to return," said Bennington, quietly.

"Speak for yourself!" exclaimed Beauvais, suddenly arousing from a long period of gloomy abstraction. "I am not ready to go while this scoundrel sits here sneering at me!"

As he spoke the last words he made a sudden dash toward the white Sioux, his hands outstretched to seize him by the throat, but, calmly retaining his seat, the renegade met the assault with a leveled revolver.

Only a sudden recoil on Beauvais's part prevented him from running against it, and the

movement brought a sneering smile to Sweeping Eagle's face.

"That's right—curb your ardor!" he said, mockingly. "I could whip you hand-to-hand, easily, but will not. If you try to lay hand on me, I'll shoot you as I would a mad-dog!"

It was an intense crisis, but Bennington has tuned to take Beauvais by the arm.

"Come away," he urged. "What you contemplate is madness."

The unhappy Frenchman's head had again fallen upon his breast, and with a deep sigh he yielded to the major's persuasive touch, and allowed himself to be led from the tent.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### WORKING FOR THE GUNMAKERS.

THERE was great excitement at Tombstone Rock, for the next few hours would make a great change in the fortunes of the prisoners of World's End. Before morning all the gunmakers would be at liberty, or the last hope would probably be gone. A plan had been formed by the dwellers in the cave, but it was one so desperate that there seemed to be only one chance in a hundred that it would succeed.

Night had fallen. The sky was clouded, and the darkness more pronounced than even during the nights which had gone before it. The shadows seemed to rest almost palpably upon the cliffs and gulches, and upon the dead surface of Lake Desolation.

Within the cave Walt Wilkins, Somerville, Blanche and Claudia were gathered in a group, ready to start at a moment's warning. Dunstan Hughes was also there, but his sullen face told that he was not pleased by the prospect; if he went at all, it would be as a prisoner, and he must go if the others did.

The four men of the party were about to make an effort to rescue the prisoners of Paradise Valley. As a first step Ben Todd and Windfoot had gone out to secure the necessary horses. Of course these must be taken from the outlaws' corral, and this seemed a most hazardous enterprise in itself.

If it was successful, the second attempt would follow.

Naturally, Blanche and Claudia were nervous and uneasy, but Somerville and Wild West Walt tried to cheer and encourage them.

"Don't git down-hearted," said the veteran, "for this is a very simple affair. I've often did more alone. Recollect on one 'casion a war-party o' eleven hundred Injuns descended on the settlements, an' captured a young woman I was uncommon fond on. I set out ter rescue her. A female temp'rance lecturer had been arter me an' got me ter sign a pledge, one article o' which forbid my killin' an Injun fur a year. But I tuk ter the trail, an' ef you'll b'lieve it, I dropped on them Injuns, one by one, tied 'em neck an' heels, an' left 'em on the prairie. I follered 'em fifty mild, an' finally tied the last one an' rescood the fair pris'ner. It was a peccoliar sight as we rid back ter see them scattered like mile-posts, only a heap thicker, an' wobblin' like sixty ter git clear o' the'r bonds."

"Where did you get ropes enough to do all this?" Blanche inquired. "It must have required a good many to tie eleven hundred Indians."

"So it did—so it did. Wal, I went ter St. Louis an' bought ev'ry 'tarnal rope they had in the city, an' tuk along a pack-mule ter carry 'em. It was a good scheme, but it made a rope-famine in St. Louis, an' thar was not only great destitution an' sufferin' among the poor, but they had ter pardon three condemned murderers, 'cause they couldn't hang 'em, havin' no rope."

"This was 'condemned' lucky for the murderers," observed Somerville, "but it seems that the lack of rope gave them more rope."

"More liberty, I take it you mean. Wal, thar's logic in that, though I never thought on't afore. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

The last words had barely passed his lips when the ranger suddenly started, moved closer to the passage, and listened intently for a moment. Then he nodded contentedly.

"It's Black Hills Ben an' the Pawnee. Now fur the verdict!"

Silence fell upon the group. It was an anxious pause and no one tried to break it. Windfoot and the scout appeared, and the latter smiled quietly as he saw the inquiring glances bent upon him.

"We have scored one success. All the horses that we need have been secured and taken to a safe point."

"Have you seen the outlaws?"

"At a distance, yes. We did not presume on our limited acquaintance to speak with them."

"That was thoughtful in you, but I fear they would not be equally polite."

"We are ready to leave, anyhow. Windfoot, you may gag the prisoner."

Hughes warmly protested, but without avail. It would have been the light of rashness to conduct him past his comrades without this precaution, as he would surely give the alarm. The Pawnee promptly guarded against this by skillfully applying the gag.

"Take a last look at Tombstone Rock," the scout then added, "and we are ready to go."



"The fun begins," added Wild West Walt, and then, producing his ever-ready tobacco, he looked gravely at Windfoot and continued: "You'd better hev a chew, Injun. It's a wond'ful narve-tonic, the weed is, an' builds up the system amazin'."

The Pawnee turned a deaf ear to the invitation, and the party passed out of the cave. It had been a most valuable shelter to them in a time of need, but they went hoping never to see it again. Windfoot, probably by the scout's order, had taken charge of Hughes. When near the outer world Black Hills Ben paused for a moment and spoke with Walt and Somerville; then they went on, and the venture was fairly begun.

Their course had been carefully marked out, and the scout led the way as rapidly as was consistent with prudence. He had previously decided that the outlaws had abandoned the search for the night, and, unless they ran upon some stray member of the band, there was no immediate danger.

Blanche and Claudia did not take an equally cheerful view of the case. Each had had a taste of captivity, and they had such a horror of again falling into the hands of their enemies that calmness was out of the question. The extreme darkness, so pleasing to their defenders, was full of gloomy menace to them; the rocks and cliffs looked forbidding and menacing; and every moment they expected to hear the shout of an outlaw, or the whoop of an Indian, sound upon the night-air.

This did not prevent prompt action on their part, and, after a season of suspense, they arrived at a canyon where the horses had been left. If the gunmakers had also been there nothing would have prevented instant departure, but the steps already taken were as nothing to what must next be done. This little handful of men had to rescue the gunmakers from the valley, and not only were the outlaws and Sioux near at hand in full force, but the armed sentinels were always patrolling the brow of the cliffs.

The undertaking seemed an impossibility.

Some one must be left with Blanche and Claudia, and Walt had been selected for this responsible place. He was more experienced than Somerville, while Windfoot could not be excelled for work at the valley.

The three adventurers started on their errand.

"We shall never see them again," said Claudia, abruptly, yielding to the pressure of circumstances at last.

"Eh? Why not?" Walt asked, innocently.

"They will be killed."

"That ain't on the programme, young woman."

"You will find it so."

"Do not take such a gloomy view of the case," urged Blanche.

"How can I do otherwise?"

"When you git ter be a vet'ran borderman like me," Walt answered, "you will take 'Never say die!' fur yer motto. Thar's always hope until an individual is buried. I had a partner once that was pronounced dead by the coroner, but me an' the boys didn't believe it. We each give in a supply o' whisky we had fur medicinal purposes, an' poured the stuff down his neck. It brung a bit o' color ter his cheeks, and we was encouraged. We sent fur a forty-gallon bar'l o' the same fluid, an' turnin' the nozzle, let it run steadily down his throat. Thar was a period o' harrer'in' onsartainty, an' we nigh give up hope; but just as the last gallon slipped down his neck, he give a long sigh an' sat up. We had saved him."

"As a doctor, you don't seem to believe in homeopathic doses," observed Blanche.

"I hain't a ghost o' an idee what you mean, but our treatment did cure in this case. It was queer, though, that the fu'st thing that feller said was: 'Boys, I'm awful dry. Jest give me a thimbleful o' whisky.' Yes, it was mortal queer, but ye see the critter had no idee that he had jest drank over a bull barrel o' the stuff."

Walt seemed wholly absorbed in considering this peculiar case, but, really, it was only a pretence. He wished to keep Claudia's mind from the perils of their situation, if possible, and while he talked his eyes were never at rest.

Constantly on the alert for danger, he watched carefully over his charges.

In the mean while Ben Todd, Somerville and Windfoot had gone toward the valley. When they reached the vicinity they paused to reconnoiter.

The darkness was so intense that little was to be seen except the slowly-pacing outlaw guards, but after a brief investigation it was decided that none of the other men were near.

It only remained to carry out their plan.

The scout turned to Windfoot.

"You can go," he said, quietly.

The Pawnee had been preparing for work. He had laid aside all his weapons with the exception of a knife. He now gave a low grunt, placed his knife between his teeth, dropped to the ground, and began crawling away like a snake.

Somerville watched him with a species of fascination. Every movement of that lithe body was a step toward the crisis in their affairs. To

Windfoot belonged the honor of striking the first real blow. If he failed, their whole scheme would go to pieces like a bubble.

Back and forth paced the nearest guard with military steps. Thus far he had suspected nothing. How long would he remain ignorant? If he once caught sight of that dark form writhing toward him, all was lost. A shout from him would alarm all the sentinels; an alarm from them would arouse the outlaw village.

The suspense was almost intolerably painful. The gunmaker pressed his hand over his eyes, resolved not to look again, but the impulse was too strong to be resisted. He looked, and, as before, saw the crawling Pawnee. But he heard no sound save the steps of the guard.

Black Hills Ben remained as motionless as a statue, and his calmness was a source of irritation to his less experienced companion. In vain Somerville tried to imitate him.

Still crawled the Indian forward. His caution, his skill, his noiseless progress was something remarkable. No part of his person was perceptibly raised above the ground save his head, and this, together with his peculiar motions, made him seem like a huge serpent crawling on its prey.

The fate of the gunmakers depended upon this dark, supple, writhing form. What would that fate be?

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### STRIKING THE BLOW.

THE outlaw guard reached the end of his beat, turned, and came back. Beside his path were several boulders of varying size. He had been accustomed to see them there, and did not think of giving them particular attention. He did not suspect that behind one of them crouched a human form; nor dream that dark, glittering eyes were fixed upon him with intense eagerness, nor know that a brown, muscular hand grasped a knife tightly, as its owner awaited his return.

Somerville saw the guard pass the boulder, and then saw Windfoot leap forward like a panther. There was the sound of a blow—no more—yet the two forms sunk to the earth together. A moment later, and one of them arose and began pacing the beat, rifle in hand.

It was the Pawnee.

Black Hills Ben crept quickly forward until he reached their red ally. Then there was another change. Somerville, watching from his covert, saw the scout walking the post in imitation of the outlaw guard, but the Pawnee had vanished.

But no, the gunmaker strained his eyes, looked closer, and saw an undulating figure moving toward the next guard. Windfoot was preparing for the second blow.

Somerville bowed his head resolutely, determined not to look again. He was no novice, but the suspense of this work was something which worried him. The fate of the valley prisoners depended on their efforts, their progress was terribly slow, success seemed almost an impossibility, and he was obliged to remain inactive during the most trying part of the drama.

A long pause, and then came a slight signal from the scout; one which, by prior agreement, was to move him to action.

It was a welcome sound. He raised his head. As far as outward appearance went there had been no change in the situation since he came, yet he knew that Black Hills Ben and Windfoot were two of the "guards" that were pacing to and fro, and those nearest the stone stairway which led to the valley. The change had been silently, successfully made, and the genuine guards who remained did not suspect that anything was wrong.

Somerville crossed the intervening space on his hands and knees. The scout did not appear to look at him, yet he quietly said:

"Lose no time, and do not forget my directions!"

The gunmaker went on. Ben was on one side of him, and Windfoot on the other. The guards beyond might see him, but the darkness was in his favor. He reached the stairway, and then went quickly down.

His hopes began to rise, but not yet dared he feel at all certain. The party in the valley which had seemed so terribly weak and small before now seemed like an army. How could they all leave the place unseen?

Somerville's nervousness had vanished the moment that he had a chance for action, however, and all the resolution of his nature was at the front. Having reached the foot of the descent he rapidly crossed the valley, keeping in the darkest shadow of the cliff. Lights still shone from the gunmakers' tents, and he smiled faintly as he imagined their surprise at seeing him.

Straight to Thomas Garrison's quarters he went, and in a moment more he had passed the door. Garrison and Long Dave Cobb were there, and the latter was talking earnestly, emphasizing his remarks by constant gestures.

"I'll eat my rifle ef I kin ever git 'customed ter this life. Makin' guns ain't my forty, ez they say in French, nur my thirty, either. Somehow I don't like ter bathe in the waters o' affliction so much ez common folkses, an' I'll eat my rifle ef I don't wish I'd been born forty year later, or never had—Thunder an' lightnin'!"

He broke off suddenly. A slight sound had drawn his attention to the door; there stood Somerville, his hand raised to command silence. "Not a word!" he exclaimed. "As you value your lives, don't give any alarm. I have come to rescue all!"

Garrison strode forward and grasped the young man's hand in silent agitation, while Long Dave coolly observed:

"I reckon I's born 'bout on time, arter all. Ef I's a baby now I wouldn't hev no show, but ef ever I kin set my feet on top o' them measly rocks, you'll see me run as ef my feet was spring-boards, an' my legs full-proof injy-rubber jumpin'-jacks, by thunderation-let-loose!"

With this remarkable declaration Long Dave jammed his hat recklessly down over his head, picked up a hammer, expectorated on his hands, and was evidently ready for work.

Garrison had been trying to speak coherently, but not with marked success, and Somerville cut him short.

"What we want to do now is to notify every one of the prisoners, impress the need of caution upon their minds, and then collect them by the cliff to receive my final orders. You and I will do this, Garrison, but bear in mind that one outcry may ruin all. Now, go!"

He pushed the excited gunmaker from the tent, and as the latter collected a measure of coolness, they went on and proceeded to arouse all the party. None had yet retired, and it was an easy task, but the confusion which they caused was something wonderful.

A few moments before gunmakers had not had a hope of escape; now, the dazzling light of liberty was flashed before their eyes. It was not strange that they were for a time too excited to act practically.

Somerville found his hands full. Not only was it his duty to bring order out of chaos, but the people must be kept from exposing themselves in the light—where the outlaw guards might see them—and the work must be done promptly.

Somehow, it was done at last, and in the shadow of the cliff he gave all some careful, final directions. Then they went on to the stone stairway. From there Somerville must lead the way, to set an example. Long Dave, despite his alleged propensity for running, asked for and received permission to bring up the rear.

Then up the stairway went the line, quickly, but very cautiously and secretly.

Somerville looked eagerly around; Black Hills Ben and Windfoot were still pacing their beats. Thus far all had worked well, and there was cause for hope. The next thing was for the gunmakers to leave the stairway and pass on to the neighboring rocks without attracting attention.

There was a brief pause, and then a dark shadow flitted noiselessly across the open space. It was followed by another, and yet another, until the place seemed alive with flitting shadows, but all was silently and cautiously done.

The scout and the Pawnee never ceased their systematic pacing.

Somerville breathed a sigh of relief when the last of his party—Long Dave—joined him among the rocks, but he gave them no time for loitering.

"Follow me!" was the order, and the long line went on.

Again came the danger of meeting some outlaw by the way, but it was happily averted, and in due time they reached the canyon where Walt Wilkins and the girls were waiting. It was a meeting in many ways affecting, and especially so to Major Bennington and Basil Beauvais. The excitable Frenchman kissed Blanche again and again, and the tears coursed down his cheeks like rain.

In the mean while, Somerville had called the other men to a recess in the rocks.

"Here are weapons which we, or rather Mr. Todd and Windfoot, have secured from the outlaws' reserve stock. Help yourselves. There are hardly enough of revolvers and knives, and some of you must go without, but each man will have a rifle. Arm yourselves judiciously."

"I suppose that means to the teeth," said Garrison.

"The rest on ye kin do that," observed Long Dave, "but 'tain't my way o' fightin'. While the rest on ye file up yer teeth, an' prepare ter chew up the enemy, I'll rely on common fire-weapons. I ain't no cannibawl, an' don't want ter be armed ter the teeth."

The weapons having been distributed, the party waited for the scout and Windfoot to join them.

"I feel a good bit encouraged, Hugh," said Walt.

"There is some hope now, but as our allies must be missed soon after they leave their posts, we can hardly expect to get out of World's End without having an alarm behind us."

"You don't onnerstan'. What I referred to was the fact that I hev rekindled my hoss, Pansy. The cherub was among them secured fur us, an' she an' me hev been relatin' our exper'unce an' distresses. 'Cordin' ter Pansy's account she's had a hard time, but she's in as good trim as ever, an' will be an amazin' help ter us on our journey. That hoss has got a



powerful smeller, an' no Injun kin git us on the hip while her nose is in the game—not ef she nose it."

"That's nothin'," put in Long Dave. "I knowed a man once who had a nose so big that he killed Injuns with it. He went all over the West without rifle, pistol or knife, an' when he met a red he jest knocked 'em over with his nose. He killed erbout three thousand a year."

"I knowed that man, too," replied Walt. "Ever hear how he used ter scalp his victims?"

"No. Can't say I did."

"He did it with his toe-nails, an' he'd take off a skulp without techin' his hands to it. He kept it up until Injuns got skeerce, and then skulped hisself the same way fur amoosement, but it prodoosed some skin-complaint an' his ha'r never grewed again."

Somerville and the majority of the gun-makers were far from being in as cheerful mood as Walt and Long Dave. Ben Todd and Windfoot did not join them as they expected, and they began to feel worried about their allies. Had harm come to them? Had they been detected and captured?

Not a sound came from the direction of Paradise Valley, but their prolonged absence was ominous.

Wild West Walt, as usual, had taken his stand near Blanche, and she noticed that, while he talked so carelessly, his keen eyes shot secret glances in all directions. He was as much on the alert as ever, and perhaps, was more worried by the delay than any one else in the party, though he gave no sign.

"Reckon I'll look about a bit," he said, suddenly, but carelessly, and in a moment more he was gone.

Blanche watched him closely, and with nervous apprehension. Somehow, she had the impression that he had detected signs of danger, and her heart beat rapidly. All at once she gave a slight start. Did she see a dark figure draw back into a recess just in front of the veteran, or was it her fancy? She wished in vain that she could warn the ranger, but he was too far away. If there was a human being in the recess it must be an enemy, and Walt was walking directly toward the point of danger.

Did a fatal surprise await him?

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE PILLAR OF FIRE.

WALT reached the point of rock, then—disappeared with suspicious abruptness. Blanche believed that she heard sounds of a struggle, but when she would have notified her friends, her tongue refused to do her bidding; she could only stare blankly at the point of rock, while her heart beat more rapidly than ever.

Then she gave a nervous start. Surely that was the sound of a blow, and it had come from the recess. Who had been stricken. Was it Walt Wilkins, or the man in ambush? She breathed a prayer for the ranger, but the very intensity of her interest made her entirely forget to give the warning at this stage of affairs.

A brief, painful pause followed, and then some one emerged from the recess, and advanced toward them at a sauntering pace. The color returned to her face. In that tall figure she clearly recognized Wild West Walt. He came to her side, and his manner was as quiet as ever.

"It wouldn't be s'prisin' ef we had a shower," he observed, scanning the darkened heavens critically.

"Walt," replied the girl, in a subdued voice, "you have had a personal encounter—a fight?"

"I've had heaps on 'em; been at it ever since I was three months old, when I trounced my nurse fur windin' me up in 'bout forty yards o' flannel cloth. Princess, I tell ye plainly, it ain't in the course o' natur' fur babies ter be made inter portable dry-goods stores, but they all has ter come to it. They hev ter wear ernough—each evidential baby does—ter uniform the hull Sioux nation, by sixty! Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"You evade the subject," said Blanche, perseveringly. "You found an enemy in that recess; I heard the sound of a struggle and a blow; and I know it was something serious."

"Not in the least. I found a sneakin' Sioux thar—I see'd him spyin' on us afore I left you—an' we had a bit o' an argyment. He had an okul chance with me, an' sech things will happen on the border, Princess—it's in the course o' natur'. Ef he got the wu'st on't, remember that my life, an' yourn, an' all our lives, depended on prompt work from me. I did it, an' the red creetur' won't trouble us no more, I—"

The ranger paused, and half raised his rifle. Two men had appeared, but every heart grew lighter as Black Hills Ben and Windfoot were recognized.

"Mount, and get away!" was the scout's terse order.

It was obeyed, and in a few moments that part of the canyon was deserted. The eventful journey was begun.

The scout had arranged his most valuable men to suit himself. He had Walt and Somerville with him at the front, while Long Dave Cobb and Windfoot brought up the rear. Of these,

all save Somerville were veterans, and he was far from being a novice. There might be some border talent among the other gunmakers, but it was no time to look for it.

As they rode away the scout explained the delay. Before he and Windfoot could get away from their "beats" by the cliff, an outlaw officer had come to change the guards, and come, too, so suddenly that they had no chance to get out of his sight.

Both adventurers had at once hit upon the same plan of action, and, trusting to the extreme darkness and natural sleepy condition of the outlaws, had coolly remained to be "relieved from duty." As the Pawnee took care not to go near enough to disclose the fact that he was an Indian, this plan worked to a charm; and when they were fairly "relieved," they seized the first chance to slip away.

They had run one more risk, but it had been of vast benefit to them. Except for that, discovery would have come at once; as it was, they might secure several hours' start.

No one was sanguine, however. Chance might at any moment bring them face to face with some of Killough's or Sweeping Eagle's men; and even if this did not occur, a hot pursuit would be begun early in the morning.

And what did this mean to them?

Between them and the settlements stretched mile after mile of wild country where they could get no aid. They were few in number, and one-fifth of the party was composed of women. On the other hand the allies could send hundreds of men in pursuit, and they would not only be eager and determined to recapture the gunmakers, but, it might almost be said, every foot of the way was familiar ground to them.

"They've got winnin' p'int about 'em," said Long Dave to Windfoot, "but ef it comes ter runnin', I'll pit my legs ag'in' theirs. I'll thank ye, Injun, ter observe these legs o' mine critically by daylight, some time. Mighty wal shaped, they be, an' elastic ez rubber. When I git skeered bad, they'll stretch out amazin', an' I kin walk right over wigwams, houses, trees an' the like."

"If Long Dave run as wal as he lie, he never git ketch'd," replied the Pawnee, soberly.

The leaders of the party had paused. They were on a rising point of land, and were looking back. Their example was imitated by all, and none needed to ask why this was done. A few yards further and they would be fairly beyond the Bowl; they had stopped for a last look at World's End.

The wide area lay silent, dark and gloomy before them, and, so lifeless did it seem, an imaginative fancy might have termed it like a city of the dead, with the canyons for graves and vaults, and the cliffs for Titanic headstones. Lake Desolation, Paradise Valley, and the outlaw village were alike invisible. Sombre silence and obscurity reigned there, as far as one could see.

With a hope in every heart, save that of Dunstan Hughes, that they might never enter the Bowl again, they went on once more.

As a whole, their progress was slow, but each advantageous point was improved, and they saw the distance growing greater between them and the valley with pleasure which they took no trouble to conceal.

Their prisoner, the outlaw Hughes, did not share any such emotion. He was sulky and vicious, and when Claudia tried to talk him into a better mood, he was impudent to an extreme. He vowed that though they might succeed in taking him East, he would never open his mouth in behalf of Edgar Wheaton. The major expressed a desire to "thrash" the fellow, then and there, but Claudia interfered and prevented any such rash act.

Blanche, too, had something to say.

She did not forget the assertions of Sweeping Eagle, and did not intend to let much time go to waste before opening the subject; but Basil Beauvais was for awhile so childishly delighted at being again with her, and knowing that she was safe, that she could not find courage to ask him the all important question.

He might, or might not, be her father, but he certainly loved her well. She remembered no parent but him, but he had always been all that was kind. Their residence had been on the border, and where there was such a comparative scarcity of men, his kind face, gray locks and fatherly care had been more to her than though they had lived in a city.

She watched her chance, and finally broached the subject.

"Father, the Sioux chief, Sweeping Eagle, made some remarkable statements to me."

Beauvais started.

"No doubt, no doubt," he replied, hastily. "He looked like a man skilled in lying."

"What do you suppose he told me?"

"Some wild thing, I have no doubt."

"He said," Blanche slowly announced, "that I was not your daughter!"

The Frenchman had expected it, but he could not avoid another start.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed, "did I not tell you he was a great liar?"

"Did he lie when he said that, father Beauvais?"

"Lie? Why, of course he did. Why do you ask such a strange question, my child?"

"Because Sweeping Eagle was very much in earnest, outwardly, when making the statement. He vowed that I was not your daughter, and I know that he is a white man."

"Some miserable renegade, no doubt; and he took that way to weaken your regard for me."

"He bade me mention Prairie Port to you," continued Blanche, looking steadily at the Frenchman.

"What of Prairie Port?"

"We lived there once, you know. But how could he know of it? He did know, and he said that he once bore me in his arms, when I was a mere infant, through a terrible storm, and gave me to you; but he vowed that you were not my father, and said you knew nothing about my parentage—that he, only, did know this."

Beauvais laughed aloud, but it was not a musical laugh, nor did it sound natural.

"This is as bad as a fairy story," he said.

"The renegade lied well."

"Was his story false?"

"It surely was."

"Yet I cannot dismiss from my heart a vague feeling that he told the truth!"

Blanche spoke earnestly, and tried to read the old man's face through the darkness. She regretted now that she had not waited until day before speaking on the subject. Her air and voice were so anxious that Beauvais turned and laid his hand upon her arm.

"My child, don't think that; don't give it a thought. It is only a trick of that unprincipled man. Surely, you will not give it a thought. In some way he learned certain facts about us, and invented the rest. That is all, I assure you. You are my daughter, and it is absurd to say otherwise."

His voice had grown firm, for, having decided to deny all, he thought that he might as well make it emphatic. Nevertheless Blanche was far from being convinced, but, before she could answer, a murmur ran through the fugitives' ranks. A discovery had been made, and as one spoke to another, all were soon looking backward.

They saw what seemed to most of them a strange sight.

The darkness was still intense, and the sky thickly clouded, but at one point a red belt seemed to be placed upon these clouds, reaching upward until it gradually died away in the deep blackness of the night.

No one needed to ask what this was—clearly, it was the light of a great fire. Its undulating motions were plainly visible, as were the sparks which shot, star-like, away from it, and as there were no houses in that direction, it was clear that it must be a gigantic bonfire.

It was a striking picture, the central band of light being so bright, the remote darkness so ebony-hued, and the intervening space such a varied field of red and black, of all shades, but the fugitive gunmakers saw in it more than an ordinary blaze.

The pillar of fire hung directly over World's End.

"There's only one way to account for it," said Thomas Garrison. "Our escape has been discovered, and, I believe, that is a signal light to convene all the outlaws and Sioux. We shall soon have the whole pack howling at our heels!"

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### RIDING THROUGH THE RIVER.

GARRISON's gloomy prediction threw the gunmakers into a brief panic, but the bordermen came to the rescue. They had seen the pillar of fire some time before, but had refrained from speaking of it, not caring to needlessly alarm their charges.

Black Hills Ben frankly admitted that Garrison had undoubtedly explained its meaning correctly, but added the pertinent inquiry:

"Is not this what we expected? We should be foolish, indeed, to suppose that Killough and Sweeping Eagle would give us unobstructed passage to the settlements."

"It's all in the course o' natur'," added Wild West Walt. "We'll hev a dispute with the red heathen, o' course, but what does it amount ter? We'll massacre off a few tribes, an' then the varmint will 'pologize an' go hum. I never see'd a more humble critter than an Injun when he comes ter the p'int o' 'pologizin'. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"May not this signal also convey meaning to some stray outlaws on the other side of us—directly in our path?" asked Garrison.

"Possibly it will."

"Then we are hemmed in with danger."

"Garrison, don't indulge in such talk," said the scout, lowering his voice. "Consider the women. You should cheer, not discourage them. Weakness in a man at this hour is something unpardonable."

"You are right, and you shall hear no more of it. I have been foolish, but it is past."

"Thar ain't a grain o' need o' bein' skeered," said Walt. "Of course we'll hev a few billion o' the enemy arter us—it's in the course o' natur'. Let 'em come! Who cares? I've been on the war-path when the Injuns was so thick that I had ter walk sideways, ter squeeze through



'em. 'Nother 'casion I couldn't even do that, an' had ter take a-holt on 'em an' move 'em aside. Worked my way like this sev'ral mild, an' then, gittin' tired on't, actually climbed up an' walked on top on 'em, steppin' from shoulder ter shoulder, from Tiger Tail Creek ter Luckaholucka, a distance o' forty mild. All the while they was ragin' fur my gore, but they didn't find me. Reckon it'll be that way this time."

Walt's cheerfulness seemed proof against everything, and it was not without effect on the more impressionable of the fugitives, but the borderers knew that the darkest fears were likely to be realized.

There was something strikingly ominous about that huge pillar of fire. They knew it to be a signal to assemble the scattered allies, or to put those to the south on the alert, and it was certainly a weird-looking thing, with its undulating, serpent-like lines, fold upon fold; its shooting stars; its soaring, majestic outline; and its silent voice, which spoke a language so vastly different to the fugitives than that conveyed to the allies.

Ben Todd did not give them much time for idle survey. Giving the word, he led the party on once more.

Half an hour later they reached a broad canyon which extended nearly east and west. Its bed was very hard, as well as level, and for five miles they were able to go at full speed. There were those among the gunmakers who wondered at this course, for it seemed to them that they ought always to bear south, but Ben and Walt were in frequent consultation, and they seemed to be of one mind.

They had marked out a course which, they believed, the pursuers would not expect them to follow, and intended to avoid the barren region in which occurred the opening scenes of our story.

They had a good-sized party to feed, and with so little food already on hand, they would do better elsewhere than in the barren mountains. Flight would also be more rapid where they were going.

The borderers now proposed to make an effort to delay, if not to outwit, the enemy. Not far ahead was a river, and Walt's past experience with it had given him an idea. It was intended that they ride down the bed of the stream. The water was shallow, and so muddy that they would leave absolutely no trail. If they could disguise their landing-place equally well, they might make considerable trouble for the pursuers.

Only an hour of darkness remained when they arrived at the river.

It was broad and shallow, the banks being, as a rule, ledges which sloped back at all conceivable angles, but in few instances approached the altitude of cliffs.

Here Walt took the lead, and the water journey was begun. The horses sunk to their knees, and often deeper, but never to the bodies, and had no trouble in moving along at a good walking gait. It was, however, a journey that the women of the party were not likely to forget.

Everywhere was darkness—blackness. The water might have been ink, so far as appearance went; the frowning sky was covered with clouds piled one upon another; and the rocks by the river reached away in various wild, striking shapes, but always darkly, ruggedly.

That night would live in memory forever.

As they went, however, a faint light in the east told of the advance of the sun, and a general scattering of the clouds overhead gave the impression that a fair day would follow. The women, at least, hoped it, nor could it come any too quickly to please them.

Suddenly there was a tumult in the line; a deeper splash than that of the horses' feet; a woman's cry and a man's shout; then a degree of confusion at that point which made every man grasp his rifle more tightly.

All at once arose Major Bennington's voice:

"The prisoner has escaped!"

"Where is he?" cried half a dozen voices.

"In the water—he is swimming. A hundred dollars to the man who retakes him!"

The major spoke excitedly, and his state of mind was generally shared. All knew by that time how important a prisoner Dunstan Hughes was, and there was no knowing what his escape would do. He must be retaken.

How he had gone no one knew. He had been riding quietly in the line, with a stout gunmaker hold of his horse's rein, and it was supposed that the bonds on both his hands and feet rendered him perfectly helpless. Yet he was gone, and Claudia's hopes were again in a state of chaos.

In this crisis the borderers remained cool and calm. The outlaw was in the water, swimming for liberty, and the light was strong enough then to show that he had gone beneath the surface. As the river was five or six feet deep in the center at that point, he had a good chance for operations.

A clear command from Black Hills Ben caused the cooler-headed of the gunmakers to scatter and watch for the fugitive to rise, but it was Windfoot who came to the front as the most active member of the party.

Passing his rifle to another man, he plunged

into the river. Claudia, who was almost speechless, drew a deep, quick breath, and prepared to watch him. She did not succeed; one moment only was the Pawnee visible, and then he disappeared as completely as Hughes had done.

Those who watched looked as vainly, too, for him as they looked for the outlaw. Had some river monster swallowed both irrevocably?

Windfoot had a well-defined plan in his mind when he took to the water. He mentally argued that, as it would not be safe to land within range of the borderers' vision, the runaway would undoubtedly swim straight down the current; that he would keep under the surface until obliged to rise for breath; and only make for the bank where distance made this safe.

The Pawnee was not only perfectly at home in water, but he had never met another person who could swim as rapidly as he. Consequently, he had gone into the river with the hope that he would actually be able to overtake the outlaw.

Acting on this idea he went beneath the surface, so that he might not miss his man, and striking out gallantly with his brown arms, shot along like a fish. Not until he was obliged to secure air did he rise, and then the quick glance which he shot around, though it did not reveal Hughes, showed something which pleased him.

On each side of the river one of his own party was running along the ledge.

Windfoot smiled grimly, took another deep breath, and then swam on. He redoubled his efforts, and his speed was something remarkable. Like that some monster fish might have passed through the water.

He had expected that by his mode of progress he would easily see the outlaw when he overtook him, but the sequel proved that he was wrong.

He was still shooting ahead when his hand struck something in the water which collided with that member in a peculiar way. He turned his head and experienced brief surprise; he was swimming side-by-side with another man, though a few strokes more would have taken him past.

Barely had he made this discovery when the second swimmer dashed at him, plainly with hostile intent. With the exception of the disturbed water there was nothing to be seen, and the Pawnee felt, rather than saw, that a hand was raised to strike him.

Quickly he flung out his own hand. It encountered a human arm, but diverted, not stayed, the blow. The arm came down, and Windfoot felt a well-known sensation in his side.

He had been stabbed!

The blood of the Indian was up in a moment. He closed with the would-be assassin like a tiger. There was a period of suspense which was painful in a physical sense; he had been under water until his powers of endurance were about exhausted; and then they rose to the surface.

Windfoot breathed twice in great gasps, and was strong again. His opponent tried to release the hand which held the knife, but in vain; the Indian's grasp was like that of a vise.

A shout arose from the shore. The men there had seen the disturbance, and they heard the water boiling and hissing as though two alligators were fighting. They plunged in and went to their red ally's aid, but when they reached the place the fight was over.

The Pawnee's great strength had won the game, and the other man was in a grip which, he thought, bade fair to crush his very bones.

He uttered a groan, and piteously exclaimed: "I yield! I yield!"

But Windfoot said nothing. Holding him fast he swam into shallower water, and, when the rest of the party arrived, swung his prisoner into the saddle in the same grim silence.

"It is Dunstan Hughes, sure enough!" cried the major.

Hughes only groaned. That iron grasp had relaxed, but the pain remained in his body and limbs yet.

"I'll eat my rifle," said Long Dave, "if the chap don't look like a wilted weed. It's said that ignorance is bliss, but when it brings a creetur' afoul o' Windfoot, it's likely ter be blister!"

## CHAPTER XXX.

### THE SIGNAL OF SMOKE.

ALL the hostility was temporarily gone from Dunstan Hughes's mind, and he felt thankful enough for his escape from Windfoot's grasp to act with becoming humility. As the Pawnee had himself applied the bonds from which the renegade escaped, he was eager to know how it had been done, feeling his reputation at stake.

Hughes explained.

During one of their halts his horse had stood close to a ledge of slaty formation, and from this he had secured a flat piece of rock with a sharp edge. Retaining this, he had persistently chafed and sawed upon his bonds until these around his wrists gave way. Then he had snatched a knife from the belt of his nearest captor, cut the cord which went beneath his horse's belly, and plunged into the water.

As he was an excellent swimmer, he would probably have escaped only for the Pawnee, but he had met more than his match. Windfoot had

the pleasure of binding him once more, and the red man was authority for the assertion that he was not likely to escape again.

This necessary delay was made as brief as possible, and the fugitives went on again. Then, and not before, the stoical Pawnee gave attention to his wound. It proved to be neither dangerous nor deep, and though some blood had flowed, he dismissed it without much notice.

By this time the darkness had begun to retreat in earnest. The clouds were scattering still more rapidly; the eastern horizon had grown bright, and it was clear that the dawn of another day was close at hand.

Black Hills Ben began to pay more attention to their immediate surroundings, for he proposed to make a landing at the first available place.

"I shall be glad to see daylight again," remarked Blanche, with a sigh. "I am tired of the darkness, and the gloomy rocks and ridges."

"Likewise, tired o' ridin', I reckon," answered Walt, who had gone to his favorite place by her side.

"I do not mind it yet; I am accustomed to riding. I know that the other women are very weary, though, and poor Claudia's heart is full of anxiety. She has found Dunstan Hughes, but will she ever get him to the settlements? The fatal twelfth of September is drawing dangerously near, and we have now to run the gauntlet, as it were."

"In the course o' natur' there'll be lively times, but I reckon we'll git through. Moses piloted the children o' Babylon outter the woods, in the days o' Adam, when the Israelites was arter 'em, red-hot, an' we won't cave in ter nobody, 'specially ez we hev plenty o' food; while that crowd had ter live on manna. I don't know what that was, but it seems that the kitchen supplies was at low ebb."

"The children of Israel were miraculously fed."

"Oh! is that so? Wal, that made it easier fur the old folks, o' course, but we ain't got no children hyar, and I'm rapturously glad we ain't. Ef we had one small boy erlong I wouldn't give a cent fur our skulps. In sech a case I should favor anchorin' the creetur' hyar, in the river, until we got the rest o' the crowd safe ter the settlements."

"The boy might not get along as well under water as that Indian friend of ours did."

"It's amazin', it really is amazin', how an Injun kin live under water. Known a case once whar two red-skins had a fight on a river bank, an' one fell in an' disappeared. T'other feller was bound ter hev his gore, an' thinkin' he was playin' 'possum somers under water, under he went, too. By sixty, that Injun stayed thar five weeks, never comin' up, an' his food was lowered to him through sev'ral foot o' water. I presoom he'd been thar now, but the river dried up an' left him stranded. Sech a dry spell had never been heerd on afore, an' it was the gin'ral opinion that the creetur' actually drank up all the water."

Day had fairly dawned, and the tops of the distant mountains were tinged with the yellow rays of the rising sun. The immediate vicinity was quiet, and the keenest glances of the borderers failed to discover any human being save those of their own party.

The scout at last saw the place for which he had been looking—a low ledge which stretched away with a surface over which horses could easily go; so a landing was made, and the effort began to break their trail.

An hour later they halted for breakfast, after which they continued their course over an open prairie until the sun had nearly reached the zenith. By that time rest for the women became an imperative necessity.

Ben Todd chose the camp in the wooded slope of a high ridge. This was one of a series of elevations which stretched away toward the southeast, nearly approaching the dignity of mountains. East of them was a prairie, broken by belts and groves of trees, and depressions which, in some cases, might almost be called barrancas—a place not unlike that where Claudia and her friends had first been captured, and Wild West Walt fell from the cliff.

When the camping place was reached nearly all the party threw themselves on the ground without much ceremony; even the gunmakers were glad of a rest.

The borderers, however, drew apart, and consulted, and, as a result, the scout and Walt soon left camp and began the ascent of the ridge.

A short effort brought them to the top, where they used unusual caution. Going to a thicket the scout parted the leaves and took a long survey. Then he drew back and made a motion.

"Look!" he said, briefly.

Walt obeyed. His gaze sought one certain point at once, and from the top of an elevation he saw smoke steadily ascending. One good look he took, and then drew back and nodded quietly.

"Thought we wa'n't mistaken," he remarked.

"It can't be an ordinary fire?"

"Not unless they are prodigal o' wood, by sixty."



"The signal is going on, then."

"Yas, an' it'll be ter Texas afore night."

"We've got to run the gantlet."

"Sartain; an' wouldn't we hev a pile o' fun ef it wa'n't fur the women? I'm jest hankerin' ter hev a dispute with them mongrel allies."

"You will get your fill before we outstrip them."

"In the course o' natur', thar'll be some fun."

Walt took an uncommonly large mouthful of tobacco, and rolled it between his jaws in happy anticipation.

"It won't do to waste time here," continued Black Hills Ben. "We'll do our work at once, and be ready to start as soon as our weaker members are fit for it."

"Zactly. We won't keep 'em waitin', and I reckon they won't keer ter wait long."

The two men had arisen, and they now separated and went different ways. The scout's mission was to reach an elevated point and make a general survey of the surrounding country, while Walt was to investigate the fire more closely, and see its builders.

He had no long journey to make to reach it, and, calculating his course well, he went on. Realizing that outlaw lookouts might be on the watch, he gave great attention to keeping under cover, and as this was not always easy, he was obliged, at times, to creep from one point to another.

All this was rare pleasure for him; he was once more actively engaged in what had been his life for years, and nothing else would have suited him as well.

Advancing thus carefully, he soon crossed the intervening depression and began the ascent of the other ridge. Here his care and skill became more marked, but he steadily drew near the fire.

The nature of the ground was such, however, that he had to go remarkably close before he obtained the desired view, and not until he crawled to the top of a mound-like knoll could he see anything more than the steadily-rising smoke. Once there he lay well concealed by bushes, parted the leaves and looked through.

Twenty yards away was the fire, but something more important was nearer. Only a few feet from his covert were three men.

Evidently they were the builders of the fire, and they sat there watching it and talking. Walt needed no explanation of their character. Their rough, lawless appearance—their coarse, brutal faces—all was in keeping with the character of Judson Killough's followers.

He listened, however, to what they were saying.

"The time is a-comin' when we shall all roll in luxury an' fine linen," observed one. "When we fall onter the settlements thar'll be heaps o' plunder on ev'ry side, an' the man is a fool who won't fill his own pockets well."

"Killough may o der us ter turn in ter the common fund all we take," suggested another man.

"Tom Benson, you're a fool! Would you neglect yer own interests in sech a case?"

"It's in that Killough ter kill the man who plays fast an' loose."

"I reckon Killough ain't the League. You forgit the Grand Chief."

"No, I don't. D'y'e know what I think?"

"No."

"I b'lieve Jud Killough is the Grand Chief, hisself."

"Nonsense, Tom Benson!"

"Nonsense, Eph Soper, I say. Don't you bet ag'in' Killough. His word goes, an' I'll bet he's the Grand Chief. More than that, I'd rather hev a tiger arter me than that same Killough when his mad is up."

"I ain't afeerd o' Killough!" contemptuously replied Soper. "I'd tweak his nose ez soon ez I would yourn, Tom."

"You dassen't do either!" retorted Tom, beligerently.

"Wal, I ain't afeerd o' Killough, anyhow."

"Hark!"

This caution came from the third man, who had said nothing before. He raised a cautionary finger, and as his two companions listened they distinctly heard the sound of horses' feet—or was there but one horse? Walt had heard it before any of them, and he had already decided that a single rider was coming at full speed.

There was a brief period of uncertainty, during which the sound came nearer, and then a horseman dashed arrow-like around a ledge and stood revealed to all.

#### CHAPTER XXXI.

##### THE PAWNEE'S LASSO.

THE horseman checked his rapid course so abruptly that the feet of his horse flung the soil in the air, and for a moment man and steed presented a striking tableau. The horse, once black, was now half-covered with foam, and scarcely a dry hair was visible. These signs and his heaving sides told that he had been speeded to his utmost for many a mile.

His rider, tall, swarthy, and imperious of look, sat gazing keenly at the fire-builders for a moment, and then sprung to the ground.

Walt Wilkins had given a little start at his first appearance. It was Killough, himself.

"How goes it, men?" the outlaw abruptly demanded.

"Fairly, l'effenant, fairly," meekly replied Soper.

"Have you seen any strangers?"

"Not one."

"How many of the men are near?"

"Nigh about all o' Gradshaw's division."

"Good! I shall want them."

"Is the enemy arter us, sir?" asked Soper, who, despite his avowed willingness to "tweak" Killough's proboscis, was as meek in that person's august presence as a lamb.

"The gunmakers have escaped."

"The blazes!"

"Have you a fresh horse for me? This one is about as near a collapse as he can be."

"Ours are close at hand, and they are fair animals."

"I'll take one of them, for I am in haste to get to Gradshaw. Now, men, pay attention to what I say. The gunmaker prisoners, numbering in all nearly thirty persons, are at liberty and making a push for the settlements. They must be stopped, or we are ruined."

"I don't reckon sech trash can fool you, l'effenant," observed Soper.

"Don't underrate them. Circumstances have mixed Black Hills Ben and Walt Wilkins up with them, and more cunning men it would be hard to find."

"I'd like a hack at 'em," said Soper, with a swager.

"Take it, if you get a chance. Those two men are not desired at World's End. Shoot them down without mercy if you get a chance. The others must be taken alive. But I am wandering from my subject. You, Benson, remain here and feed this fire; don't let the signal die out to-day. The rest of you go to some elevated point and watch. If you get sight of the runaways, let me know at once."

"We will, sir."

"Bring the horse!"

Killough looked about and, seeing some cooked meat on a rock, proceeded to eat it with an avidity that suggested that he had not partaken of food since the previous day. Then he sprung upon the horse and galloped away.

Wild West Walt drew a deep breath. He saw that the outlaw lieutenant was in a tiger-like mood, and savagely determined to recapture the gunmakers, and he realized then, if not before, what would be the force of the movement against them. The panting, foam-covered horse had been ridden almost to death, and Killough's will was as strong as ever.

It seemed, too, that a portion of the outlaws, under a man named Gradshaw, were directly in the fugitives' path, and this, with the hundreds of World's End Leaguers, and the Sioux, following hotly in pursuit, and the signal-fires burning on almost every peak, made their position most desperate.

"It'll be the marcy o' the Lord, ef we ever git through!" muttered the veteran, as he crawled away.

He reached the summit of the other ridge without adventure. Black Hills Ben was not visible, and he was about to descend to camp without him when the scout appeared. Walt noticed that his firm face bore a graver expression than was usual to it.

"Wal?" Walt questioned.

"There is a fire burning on nearly every high point of land as far as I can see. I counted six pillars of smoke. I tell you, Walt, even with the warning we have had, we have not estimated this huge conspiracy at its full value. Its scope is something tremendous, and we've a hard job on hand to get our party through."

"Great snakes! I reckon you're right."

"There is a detachment of men numbering upwards of a hundred over East there, and, of course, they are of Judson Killough's band."

"Zactly, an' Jud is on hand, hisself. I see'd the creetur, an' I tell yo my fingers itched ter give him a shot. But it wasn't safe. He had three men with him, an' in the course o' natur', any row would hev put our hull party in a hot-box."

"Certainly. Now, as to our next step. We can't stop here."

"Kin we leave hyar?"

"We must, and I have marked out our route. I could easily trace, from my elevated position, a canyon that cuts the prairie down there. It is five miles long, or more, and ends at a peak as wild as World's End. We must get there as soon as possible, and then keep on, or turn at bay, as we think best."

"Your idee is solid, an' we'd better lose no time. The women are some rested, an' as fur me, I eased up on my jints while I was layin' on my face, watchin' Killough. My jints is remarkable that way, though I one't knowed a man who was so fastidious that he tuk hisself ter pieces ev'ry night, like ez though he was a watch, an' wound up the seprate members in cotton-battin'. He had an idee he'd prolong his life that way, an' mebbe he would, only he mislaid his back-bone one night, an' in huntin' for it he fell down-stairs an' broke his neck."

The borderers at this moment reached camp, and the leader gave the word for prompt departure.

While the others were preparing, he went to the edge of the wood, and carefully studied the ground in advance. It was a matter of vital importance that they gain the canyon unseen, and the cover was not of the best. He did not like the prospect, but there was only one thing to do—make the best of it and go on.

When all was ready for the start he led the way. Taking advantage of every tree and bush, he hurried the party on to the barranca. Whether the trip was a success they had no means of knowing, but the fact that Walt had heard Killough order two of his men to go to elevated points and watch keenly, left no ground for conviction that all was well.

The barranca was gained, however, and there was a good deal of satisfaction in being somewhat screened from view. The cleft was narrow, and the walls from sixty to eighty feet high.

It was a providential thing that this cover was there for them.

The scout was anxious to get to the mountain as soon as possible. Clearly, it would be madness for them to press on by day, if cover could be found, and he had planned to halt at the peak and await the coming of night.

The bed of the canyon was so smooth that the horses were put to a gallop and, keeping near the right-hand cliff, which was, of course, the point where they were least likely to be seen, the fugitives hastened forward toward the peak.

Not one of the party was sanguine, and though they were cautious not to express their views, the borderers knew it would be gross carelessness of the outlaws to let this convenient road go unwatched. If they had reason to believe that the gunmakers were near, they would certainly see the possibilities of the canyon. The enemy might be met in force, or singly, at any point of the curving cleft, and then only a chance to save them.

Everybody stopped as Ben Todd reined in his horse, and then backed him a few paces.

Clearly, the scout had made some discovery, but when they asked what it was, he made no reply. For a few moments he remained in deep thought, and then beckoned Windfoot to his side. They conversed earnestly for awhile, and the Pawnee took a look for himself. Then he took his lasso and glided ahead until he was lost to view.

The fugitives exchanged glances, and more than one shivered. Some new danger menaced them, but what it was they did not know.

Somerville, unheeding the scout's warning gesture, went to his side.

"May I ask what it is?"

"Look, if you will, but be very careful. Look at the right hand cliff."

The gunmaker obeyed. Showing only the necessary part of his head, he took the view, and, aided by the scout's directions, at once perceived the object of concern. A man was standing by the edge of the cliff—if the rock which, at that point, was very low, could be thus dignified—leaning upon his rifle and gazing fixedly ahead, off across the plain.

Whether he was there as a watcher over the canyon, or by chance, could not be told, but he certainly was there, and they could not pass the cleft unseen by him.

More than this, Somerville recognized him. He had often seen the man on guard at Paradise Valley.

He did not communicate this fact to the scout, for his gaze had fallen on another object which held it so closely that he forgot all else. It was the figure of the Pawnee. The Indian was moving along the canyon, still grasping the lasso, but he seemed more like a dusky shadow than anything else. He kept as close to the cliff as was possible—so close that, at times, he actually seemed flattened against it—and though he used considerable speed, his movements were wily and snake-like in the extreme.

The outlaw did not once look down; he did not stir. Perhaps he was building air-castles of the time when the League would fall upon the settlements, and give him the plunder which his depraved heart desired.

Windfoot came to a halt. Somerville saw him glance up at the man now almost above him. Then he deftly arranged the lasso to his liking. Next, he stood erect for the first time, and then the lasso shot snake-like from his hand; it rose with surprising force and accuracy; the noose settled over the outlaw's head.

The surprised man gave a sudden start, and one of his hands flashed toward his neck. It did not reach that point. Windfoot had been quick to improve his chance, and as he ran back a few steps the lasso tightened and the outlaw reeled, clutched vainly at the air, and fell from the rock directly into the canyon.

#### CHAPTER XXXII.

##### LONG DAVE'S GRAPPLE.

WINDFOOT was by the outlaw's side almost as soon as he touched the ground, and Somerville saw that he held a knife ready for use. Evidently it was not needed—the man was stunned or dead—and the Pawnee quickly removed the lasso and stowed the body away in a recess. Then he retraced his steps with quick motions of his muscular limbs.



All this had been done with such rapidity that Somerville could hardly realize it. Some days ago he had wondered why Black Hills Ben, in selecting Claudia's small escort, had chosen an Indian as one member. As he saw more of Windfoot, he ceased to wonder.

When the red-man came around the point of rocks his lasso was neatly coiled, and there was nothing to tell of what he had done. He looked at Ben in passing, and gave the slightest possible nod, and then swung himself into the saddle.

The fugitives went on as before. When they passed the recess Somerville glanced that way, but a boulder hid all that would otherwise have been seen.

Only a mile then separated the party from the peak, and this distance was soon passed. As the scout had said, he deemed it best that they should stop there until night, at least, but he had been at a loss to know just where they would find shelter in a place of refuge. He remembered having seen the peak once before, but had never set foot upon it.

A way out of his dilemma was suddenly, and very satisfactorily, found.

Walt had been looking earnestly at the peak, and he abruptly broke the silence.

"Great snakes! I've b'en hyer afore—thought I knowed that hump. See hyer, Ben Todd, ef ye want a hidin'-place up thar, I'm jest the man ter lead ye ter it."

"What kind of a hidin'-place?"

"A cave that'll take in our hull party, an' the hosses, an' never be no smaller fur it. It ain't so secret as that hole under Tombstone Rock, but it's as big as all Lake Desolation, I reckon."

"Lead on, then, by all means. Such a place will be a blessing to us."

The scout's face had cleared perceptibly. He had unbounded faith in Walt's judgment, and, envired by foes as they were, such a refuge was what he had expressed it—a blessing.

Walt helped him to a fresh supply of tobacco, and then held out the remainder to Windfoot, with the old inquiry:

"Chaw, Injun?"

The Pawnee gave no evidence that he heard, however, and Walt took his place at the front and they went. The canyon was at an end; they were at the base of the peak; and the ascent began. It was no easy journey, and they wound around in a devious course in order to gain the decisive point, but after making use of many a gulch and ravine they reached a flat rock which was like a roughly-hewn table.

On each side was a rough descent; on the other a cliff one hundred feet high. Up to this point there had been no sign of the promised cave, but after advancing a few yards a cavity in the face of the cliff became visible. It was about ten feet square, and all was darkness beyond it, but Walt rode in unhesitatingly, and the others followed in order.

The veteran had said that they need have no fear of chasms under foot, but though their horses' feet rung on solid rock, few of the party were inclined to move about more than was necessary.

"Wait a leetle," advised Walt. "Ef thar ain't been no 'arthquake, nor robbers, hyar, I'll perdooce a torch in a jiffy. A glimmer will be welcome."

While speaking, the ranger had been busy, and he now gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Hyar we be, all serene. Who's got a match? We'll hev a glim, an' sorter look the field over. This is a mighty pokerish place in the dark, I admit, but it's nothin' when ye git used ter it—the dark ain't."

The torch was lighted, and though its rays did not penetrate any great distance, it was enough to show that the place was safe. All the fugitives dismounted, and Walt found work for several of them. Other torches were at hand, and he directed that some be lighted.

The horses were led to the rear of the cave, and there, beyond a second exit, was a level field green with grass. Plainly, it would furnish grazing for all the animals for a week, and the veteran made known another good point.

Those who had accompanied him could see that high, rocky walls surrounded the valley, and he explained that the tops of the rocks were utterly inaccessible, except from the interior. Thus, pasturage was furnished for the horses, they could not stray away, and the outlaws and Sioux could not approach to steal or shoot them—unless, indeed, some phenomenal climber accomplished a remarkable feat.

The cave, itself, was two hundred feet long, and, on an average, sixty wide; the roof being usually low, and strangely rent and creviced in every conceivable way. Besides the main entrance there was a second at the east end of the cave, but this was not only too small for the passage of horses, but was so banked up with earth and rocks that it did not seem likely that any one would discover it from the outside.

Every one was pleased with the new refuge, and there was a general feeling that it might be well to remain longer than had at first been intended. With the force which they had it seemed probable that they could defend the cave as long as their ammunition lasted, and with the hills so full of outlaws, it would certainly be precarious work trying to pass on for the time.

Black Hills Ben called Long Dave, Walt, Somerville and Windfoot to his side.

"I want to know your idea about provisions," he said.

"In the course o' natur', we're mournfully short," returned Walt.

"But these hills are full of game."

"Yas, but I don't s'pose it'll come an' offer itself up as a sacrifice. 'Tain't human natur', nor animal natur'."

"Risky as it undoubtedly is," Ben continued, "I believe that three or four of us ought to go out and see what we can get, taking care not to be gone a great while. Of course, the sound of our rifles will be likely to betray us—though the enemy may suppose some of their own number fired—but with them so thick around us they are next to certain to find our trail, as we came up the peak. Anyhow, we must have something to eat and Long Dave, Somerville, Windfoot and I will go out. Men, let us understand that we are not to go far, and use all possible caution. The outlaws are near—be careful, very careful, indeed."

There were no elaborate preparations to make. Black Hills Ben spoke with Garrison and the major, and then the four men set forth. Separating at the end of the ledge, each went his way, keenly on the watch for game and outlaws.

Somerville had what was believed to be the safest point of the line, and he went on with all the skill possible. It was a compliment to be selected as a companion for such men, and he did not want to lose their good opinion of his abilities. He used his eyes freely, but saw no living creature worthy of being called game, nor did he see any of his allies, but, some hundred feet above, the column of smoke still rose, pillar-like from the highest point of the peak.

It was safe to assume that the enemy were not sleeping.

Evidently, Somerville was not in hunting luck that day. Look as he might, he could see nothing to shoot. It was not long, however, before he heard two rifle shots almost as one, and felt sure that Ben Todd and the Pawnee had made their mark. Anxious not to be outdone, he pressed on, but had gone less than fifty yards when a rifle cracked still nearer at hand, and just above him on the peak.

He glanced quickly upward.

A nearly-smooth ledge extended from where he stood to a point ten rods away, being formed at an angle about equal to an unusually steep house-roof. Just as he looked he saw Long Dave run forward to the top of this, and bend over something.

He had shot some game, but what it was Somerville could not see.

Even as he looked he saw something more. Two brawny Sioux warriors darted from cover, and, knife in hand, ran toward Long Dave, who, clearly, was unsuspecting of their presence. Somerville saw at once that the borderman's life was in great peril.

Another moment and he sent forth a ringing shout of warning to Long Dave, while at the same time his rifle leaped to his shoulder.

The red assassins were almost upon the borderer, but one of them never reached him. Somerville's rifle cracked, and the object of his aim dropped in his tracks. Long Dave wheeled, and he turned just in time to see the knife of the remaining Sioux raised over him. It fell, but Dave seized the red man's arm, and the blow was made futile.

For a very brief space of time the two swung about in a close grapple, but as Somerville started up the ledge to his comrade's aid, they fell together, and, toppling over the brow of the rocks, came shooting down the ledge at full speed.

It was so steep that neither could check himself, and they rolled over and over with rapid evolutions, neither being able to gain an advantage. The gunmaker feared for Long Dave's safety in such a rough tumble, but stood ready with his knife to render any necessary aid.

They struck level ground at last, but while the Sioux lay perfectly quiet after they came to a stop, Long Dave quickly gained a sitting position and looked seriously at his late adversary.

"I'll eat my rifle," he declared, "ef I wa'n't born ter ill luck. This never'd happened ef I'd been born forty year later!"

Just then three or four bullets whistled past them. They looked up the rocks and saw a dozen Sioux running toward them. Long Dave sprung to his feet.

"Run!" he cried. "It's that or be killed, an' I prefer ter run. Go it, old man, or you'll be minus a skulp, by thunder!"

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

##### LOST!

WALT WILKINS waited near the mouth of the cave in some anxiety. He lacked the faith to believe that the attempt to secure game would be prosecuted without collision with the enemy, and not only compelled each of the gunmakers to keep his rifle in his hands, but had Garrison and four others by his side, so that they could move at once to cover the retreat of the hunters, if necessary.

The first few scattering shots impressed him as being favorable, but he waited with unabated anxiety. His friends might have secured game,

but what would be the result of their shots? Would the report bring a cloud of the allies upon them?

Suddenly, three or four shots sounded almost together. Wild West Walt started and raised his rifle.

"Men," he said, quietly, "prepare fur a triffin' dispute. In the course o' natur', we are bound ter swap lead with them critters. Remember that it's their lives or ourn, an' ez fur me, I don't want ter die, an' won't ontill I stop breathin'."

Other shots followed, and the veteran went further out on the ledge. Suddenly Black Hills Ben and Windfoot appeared, staggering under the weight of game, and evidently making great haste.

"To the rescue!" cried the scout. "Long Dave and Somerville are in trouble. Don't let them be taken!"

Even as he spoke the other two men came in sight. They were running rapidly, but their manner was that of men who still had their wits about them, and were proceeding systematically. Only a few yards behind them, however, several Sioux warriors were running in hot pursuit. Their rifles seemed to be empty, for they made no effort to use them, but they were plainly determined to attack the white men at close quarters.

But Walt saw more. Four other Sioux were speeding in the same direction, and, screened from the view of Somerville and Dave by a formation of rocks, were bound to meet them at a certain point, taking them by surprise and putting their lives in jeopardy.

Walt's rifle leaped to his shoulder and, almost before it became stationary, it seemed, the rocks rung with the report and one of the Indians dropped. Another moment and the veteran was bounding to the rescue.

Garrison, greatly excited, raised his own rifle, but in his nervous state, utterly failed to get a "bead" on the savages. Before he could do so Ben Todd reached the spot and, without a word, snatched the shaking weapon from the gunmaker's grasp.

He wheeled; he fired, without seeming to take aim. Another Sioux fell, however.

Walt Williams saw the man go down, and he went at the others like a cyclone. One stopped and raised his rifle, but he did not fire. The veteran had drawn a revolver, and he was just a moment ahead of the red-man.

Long Dave and Somerville rounded the point of rock, and as they did so they were treated to the spectacle of two men writhing and struggling on the ground like tigers in a grapple. It was over almost as they looked, however; Walt sprang to his feet, dashed his hand across his eyes and pointed to the cave.

"That's the way, an' the quicker you git thar the better. Thar's a s'prisin' activity among the red creeturs, by sixty!"

The trio started at full speed. Evidently Walt's late adversary was not in condition to molest them, but as they neared the cave, the bullets began to whistle around them again. Somerville glanced up the side of the peak, and saw Indians and outlaws springing up at all points. They had stirred up a nest of hornets, but no one regretted it.

Discovery would surely have come, anyway—those sharp-eyed Sioux would not have overlooked the broad trail up the peak—and by their bold push they had secured needed food for the party.

Black Hills Ben, Windfoot and Major Bennington boldly exposed themselves and returned the fire of the allies, but their friends soon reached the cover of the cliff unharmed, and then all retreated to the cave.

Every one was in good spirits, for their own party had not a severe wound to show, though Long Dave was somewhat bruised by his fall down the ledge.

The majority of the gunmakers expected an instant and decisive fight, but Todd assured them that this was not at all likely.

"We are under cover, and they are not going to attack a force as large as ours without more investigation," he added.

For half an hour all was quiet outside, and then a white flag was discovered waving on the slope below. Black Hills Ben decided to answer it, and, doing so, brought forth Judson Killough, who expressed a desire to talk. Some preliminary discussion resulted in a meeting of six men on the ledge outside the cave.

They were Ben, Walt and Somerville for the fugitives, and Killough, Sweeping Eagle and Burt Starbuck for the allies.

Killough came to the place of meeting with a confident, easy manner, as though he was doing the gunmakers a favor, rather than treating with an enemy of any power, by exchanging words with their representatives.

"Well, Todd," he said, abruptly, "what do you expect to do, if I may ask?"

"We are going on to the settlements," the scout quietly replied.

"Are you aware that hundreds of my men, and Sioux warriors, are in your way?"

"That is their misfortune, not my fault. We don't seek their blood, but if we are molested, we shall surely make it hot for them."



"Upon—my—word!" sneered Killough, with very slow utterance. "I hope you will not utterly wipe our small army of five or six thousand out of existence! It would really be unjust to fling your twenty odd men upon us so heavily."

"Was it to say this that you came here?" Ben coolly asked.

"No," answered the outlaw, with sudden change of manner. "We are here to demand your surrender."

"Then you'll go back disappointed. We'll not surrender."

"Is it possible that you will be mad enough to resist?"

"We shall resist, certainly."

"This is a piece of folly hardly to be expected from such a man as Black Hills Ben."

"If you think you can storm our fort, you are at liberty to try it, at any time."

"We can do it, of course," Killough easily replied, "but, if we see fit to hold off, how long can you defy us? Fools! we can soon starve you out!"

"Try that, if you wish. In fact, suit yourself, sir," the scout indifferently answered.

"We want our gunmakers back alive, and you know as well as anybody that they must yield sooner or later. Why will you defy fate? Help can't come for you—why not surrender at once, before our men are stirred up to a furious pitch of anger?"

"Out there," interrupted Sweeping Eagle, with a gesture as abrupt as his words, "several of the young men of the Sioux Nation lie dead. They were skillful hunters and fearless warriors, and beloved of their brothers. The hearts of my braves now burn with passion, and if more red warriors are slain, they will rend the white men to pieces!"

"That's all right, except your pretense of Indian ways," Ben coolly answered. "Come down off your high horse, Mr. Sweeping Eagle; we all know you are no Sioux, but an ordinary, every day renegade."

Sweeping Eagle was momentarily confused, and Judson Killough took up the thread of conversation again.

"I appeal to your common sense, Todd—don't resist when you have no hope, and thereby anger our followers. Once their blood is up, we may not be able to manage them."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"Of the kind, yes; but you don't understand us, Chief Killough. You are not dealing with children or cowards. We have the courage to resist, and will do so to the end, let that be as bitter as it may. Take particular notice of what I say, for it covers the whole ground. We will not surrender to you, but will fight to the end, as I said before. Send on your outlaws and red-skins; we will give them a warm reception. We are cornered, I will admit, but we defy you!"

"Now you talk ter the p'int, Benjamin!" added Walt, emphatically. "Kin you take that hint, Mister Killough? Ef not, send on your legions what, hanker ter be trounced, an' I'm a Root Digger ef we don't depopulate yer hull pestilentious gang. Yes, by hickory!"

The veteran thumped his rifle upon the ledge, but Killough's face flushed red with anger.

"Your blood be on your own heads—we will attack inside the hour!" he declared.

"Let yer gentle creetur's soar!" advised Walt.

The outlaw cast a furious glance at each of his enemies, and then turned away.

"Come, Sweeping Eagle; we will get to work at once. There is abundant slaughter ahead for your red tigers!"

"When they begin ter butcher, jest let 'em look out that the helpless lambs don't bunt 'em in the stummick."

Walt sent this friendly warning after them, but they gave no evidence that it was heard. The two leaders strode away, with Starbuck more slowly following, and the other three men turned back toward the cave.

"We are in for it," Black Hills Ben observed.

"In the course o' natur', thar is bound ter be a dispute, but them varmints will get awfully trounced ef they merlest us. We've got the right o' the argyment, an' are bound ter win in the end. The right allays does. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

They entered the cave, and Ben Todd's observing eyes at once perceived a commotion for which he could not account.

"What's this?" he demanded. "What is wrong?"

"*Mon Dieu!* my poor Blanche!" cried Beauvais.

"What of her?"

"She is lost—lost!"

"Miss Beauvais has strangely disappeared," the major explained.

"Disappeared! How in the world could that be?"

"That is what puzzles us. We can't find her, nor explain where, nor how, she has gone."

"Where is Dunstan Hughes?"

"Safe where we put him."

"And Blanche Beauvais is not to be found?"

"Just so. We have searched everywhere, but she has gone as mysteriously as though the

earth had swallowed her up. It is incomprehensible!"

Black Hills Ben evidently thought so, too, for he looked at the major in a dazed, startled way.

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### THE SECRET OF THE CHASM.

EVERYBODY seemed confused, but Todd finally drew out a more coherent explanation. Blanche had been missed, and though they had searched everywhere, they had found no sign of her, and nothing to give them a clew as to how she had vanished. This was all the more mysterious as the cave was very regular in shape, as far as its sides went, and at the rear opened into the little valley where the horses were grazing.

Black Hills Ben acknowledged that he was puzzled.

"She has been taken by some evil spirit!" lamented Beauvais. "I shall never see my poor Blanche again!"

"Long Dave and the Pawnee have gone to the horse-corral," explained Garrison, "and they may bring some news."

"That is it!" cried Somerville, who had heretofore been silent. "Blanche has wandered out and ascended the rocks."

"Why should she do that?" Ben asked.

"Now you ask what I can't explain."

"I don't believe the Princess did it," asserted Wild West Walt. "She's a level-headed gal, an' she'd never run sech a risk. This hyar roof above us is tremenjously broken up, an' I ain't sure but thar may be some passage up thar."

He looked at the ragged rocks just over their heads, but at that moment Long Dave rushed in from the "corral."

"I'll eat my rifle ef she ain't gone!" he announced.

"Gone where?" the scout demanded.

"Down inter the chasm."

"What chasm?"

"The one beyond the rocks that wall in the hoss-lot."

"How do you know she's gone there?"

"See'd the lassoes hangin' down the rocks. Ye see, she pieced three on 'em tergether, an' made a string long enough ter go down with. They're hangin' thar now, but she's gone. Why did she go? I don't know, no more than as though I'd ben born forty year later."

"Come on, Hugh!"

Walt spoke excitedly to Somerville, and, grasping his rifle, hurried out into the corral. He knew to whom to appeal in this crisis; he knew that Somerville would be even more interested in Blanche than himself, and that the young gunmaker had a strong arm and cool head.

"Walt, what do you make of this?" Somerville asked, as they strode along together.

"Foul play, lad."

"Foul play?"

"Yas. That is ter say, the Princess never left hyar o' her own free will; you kin bet all yer inheritance on that."

"Then how did she go?"

"Now you stump me."

"All the rest of the party are here."

"Yas—but you wait a bit, lad, until I have sorter looked the field over an' did some roominatin'. A pile is ter be larned by puttin' on yer thinkin'-cap—great snakes! yes. See the Injun up thar! He looks like a tarnal snake, by sixty!"

Windfoot did make a striking picture as he lay flat on the top of the rocky wall, his dusky figure almost invisible, but his keen eyes flashing swift glances about. His position was one where, if the allies could not get at him, they were liable to take a shot at him at any time, and this they would surely do if they gained a position where they could see him. It would be something strange if they did not soon secure such a position.

As Walt and Somerville came up, after a laborious scramble, the Pawnee pointed and briefly said:

"There."

Following this direction, the new comers had soon seen nearly all that he had seen. The wall of rock was about forty feet wide at the top, and at the further side ended abruptly in the gulf of which mention has been made. As Walt stated when they first entered the cave, this cliff was so steep that it seemed almost impossible for anyone to climb it, but, at present, a line of connected lassoes reached from top to bottom, being secured to a point of rock.

The gulch below was still and deserted, however.

"This explains how she went," said Somerville, gloomily.

"I dunno whether it does or not," Walt replied, "unless you're magician enough ter tell why she went."

"I can't imagine."

"I hold that she didn't go alone."

"But she is the only missing person."

"Don't keer fur that. I can't see no 'arthly reason why she should run away so, and, furthermore, I don't believe she could go down that lasso alone. I don't believe she went willin'ly, anyhow, an' I believe that thar was a man in the scrape."

"Wah! Walt, he no fool," observed Windfoot, who, never changing his position, had listened to all. "Look there!"

He pointed again. In several places shallow collections of earth, too feeble to bear vegetation, filled the hollows of the ledge. He had indicated one of these, and as the veteran looked, he at once saw what the Pawnee meant.

"Great snakes! there they be!"

Somerville, too, had used his eyes, and in this earth deposit he saw two sets of footprints side by side, one having been made by small, delicate feet, and the other by large, coarse boots.

"The Princess an' her captor," commented Walt, who then walked to the edge of the rock, drew up the lassoes and examined them critically.

"These was taken from our own stock," he said, "an' I see but one way ter explain it. Some o' them pestilential outlaws was in the cave when we come, an' now they hev stolen the Princess, took our lassoes, an' got her away."

"Walt, he no fool," said the Pawnee, with a short nod. "His head long—he great warrior—he have eyes, an' know how to use them. Big chief!"

"Injun," quoth the veteran, "no human is deaf ter flattery, an' praise from you is worth havin', by sixty. In the course o' natur' you diskivered all this yerself, an' it does credit ter you. Don't s'pose you'd like a chaw o' the weed, would ye?"

"Windfoot no eat grass."

"Should s'pose not, but I ain't ashamed ter, while Pansy does it. That boss is a person o' sense, an' what's good enough for her will do me. Hugh, let's go down. We've got at the secret, an' the rest will want ter know it."

"Walt," said the young gunmaker, earnestly, "what is to be done about Blanche?"

"What do you suggest?" the ranger quietly asked.

"I, for one, am going at once to her rescue."

Walt put out his hand promptly.

"Lad, shake! You're a man arter my own heart, an' it lays with you an' me ter do this job. The rest will be needed hyar, but I'll take my affidavit that the Princess mustn't be left with them wolves. You an' I'll rescue her."

Somerville pressed the veteran's hand warmly.

"Heaven bless you, old friend. With your help I feel sure that she can be rescued."

Walt was less confident, but he expressed no doubts. They descended the wall and made their report to their companions, and Basil Beauvais was again in despair.

"Sweeping Eagle will again have my child!" he moaned. "My poor Blanche! what an unfortunate lot is hers!"

"Cheer up, comrade!" said Wild West Walt, cheerfully. "It ain't settled that she's lost—not by a good 'eal!—fur Hugh an' me are goin' ter hev her back. Sech tribulations will come, jest like the ordinary affairs o' life, an' the Princess won't be the worse off fur them."

Beauvais could not take such a view of the matter, but he brightened a good deal when Walt, after a conference with Ben Todd, announced that he and Somerville were going out to Blanche's rescue.

The adventurers had few preparations to make, and when arrangements had been made regarding a possible return, they started. Windfoot had remained on the rocks, and he helped them down, and then drew up the lassoes. Their way of return was cut off, but a signal had been agreed upon which would bring aid when needed.

Walt glanced keenly up and down the gulch. Nobody being visible, he turned their attention to the ground, where everything was very favorable for trailing.

"Two men," the veteran commented. "I felt sure thar must 'a' been as many as that, as they could never got her out so secret. Now fur the follerin'. You keep yer eyes open, lad, an' I'll do the trailin'."

Before he finished speaking he was striding away, and Somerville followed closely. The trail led through the gulch a hundred yards, and then turned abruptly to the left, where there was an easy slope. Beyond this point it would be real labor to follow, and danger would lurk at every step.

Walt had turned to speak with Somerville when the report of a rifle sounded dully. The veteran flashed a quick glance backward.

"It's from the cave," he said, "an' it follers that—"

Several other shots sounded in rapid succession.

"It's begun," he added, quietly; "the allies hev attacked the cave. I expected this, an' I'm glad we're wal away. Ef we wa'n't, we might find trouble ter get out. Great snakes! they're at it in 'arnest, ain't they?"

There was good cause for his words. Shot was following shot with such rapidity that all was a jumble, and a long, continuous, hollow roar at that.

"The allies are trying to take the cave by storm!" Somerville exclaimed.

"No doubt on't."

"Walt, it is hard to leave our friends in peril."



"Sartain, lad, sartain; but remember Ben Todd's orders. We was ter go fur the Prince's, an' pay attention ter nobody else. So come on."

Once more the veteran moved. They had reached hard and, in many places, stony ground, but his instinct seemed to make good all lack of direct means, and the trail was never lost. He followed it up the ascent, while Somerville kept the closest possible watch for danger. The firing near the mouth of the cave continued—though it had grown desultory, causing Walt to believe that the assault had been unsuccessful, and that they had settled down to a siege—and this would, of course, draw the attention of the enemy, but there was enough left to make the trip of the would-be rescuers one of great peril.

The trail led directly east, and as they went evidence was soon vouchsafed to show that they were approaching an outlaw encampment. There, no doubt, Blanche had been taken.

Walt glanced at the sun. It was fast disappearing behind the western hills, and had they not been on such elevated ground, would have been invisible already.

"It's my opinion that we'll find the Princess at the camp," said Walt, after a careful survey, "an' we'll move on in that direcksion. I notice the firin' is over."

"Yes. What do you infer from that?"

"Simply that Jud Killough is restin'. He'll need ter rest afore he gits inter that cave, an' may take a monstrous long one. He don't want ter tempt the Pawnee's rifle."

Another short advance, and they saw the outlaw camp before them. It was in a small, open space, where stood two cabins, which seemed to have been erected years before. They were weatherbeaten and misshapen; whether they were occupied could not be told. Half a dozen men were scattered around the camp, all engaged in preparing a supper which, plainly, was intended for a great many men.

"No sign of Blanche," said Somerville, gravely.

"No, but you kin bet she's in one o' them cabins. The trail leads hyer straight as an arrow, but thar she is. Wait a bit, lad, until it gits darker, an' then I'll go forrard an' see what's inside. In the course o' natur', we shall—Down, lad, down!"

Walt broke off suddenly, and actually forced the gunmaker to the ground. Then he stretched his tall form out beside him. Somerville, however, had no occasion to ask questions. He saw two men advancing almost toward them, evidently bound for the camp, and these men were Killough and the Sioux chief Sweeping Eagle.

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### THE CAPTIVE OF THE CABIN.

KILLOUGH and Sweeping Eagle came on. Whether they would have passed the boulder without making any discovery cannot be known, for at that moment their attention was drawn to a man who advanced quickly toward them from one of the cabins. Walt at once recognized him; it was Burt Starbuck.

He walked directly toward Killough, and spoke abruptly:

"Lieutenant, I have something of importance to say to you. Will you stop here a moment? Sweeping Eagle can go on to the first of the cabins."

He glanced at the white Sioux as he spoke, and there was but little of good will in his expression.

Killough consented without argument, and Sweeping Eagle went on. Again Starbuck glanced after him, and his expression did not change.

"Well, Burt, what is it?" Killough asked.

"Lieutenant, do you remember a conversation that we had in the mountains that day when we waited for the Sioux, Swift Eagle, who never came?"

Walt Wilkins smiled grimly. He remembered that conversation, and could have told them why Swift Eagle "never came."

"I remember we spoke at some length that day," answered the lieutenant.

"Possibly you remember that Blanche Beauvais was mentioned."

Killough flashed a quick glance at his subordinate.

"Yes."

"Do you remember that I told you I loved the girl?"

"I think it was mentioned."

"Well, since then you gave her to that renegade, Sweeping Eagle, the man who has gone back on his nature and become a sort of miserable hybrid. Was this right, lieutenant? Was it justice? Did you do your duty by one of your own followers, when you robbed him of the woman he loved, and passed her over to that fellow?"

Starbuck spoke with ill-suppressed excitement and his earnestness was not without effect on Killough. The latter looked troubled and uneasy.

"This is true, Burt, but Sweeping Eagle was dead set for her, and—there are other girls among the gunmaker crowd."

"Two insignificant creatures—how would you like to give up Claudia Bennington for them?"

It was fast growing dark, but a slight flush was visible on Killough's face.

"That is a different case," he replied. "There was, and is, no other claimant for her hand."

"Your argument is weak, lieutenant, for you know very well that long before Sweeping Eagle ever thought of her, I made known my desire to possess her. Have you dealt fairly with me, Killough?"

"We talked about this at World's End, and I told you that it was too late, as I had given her to the chief," replied Killough, evidently anxious to drop the subject. "Besides, my dear Burt, Blanche is now beyond our reach, and I am not sure we shall ever get any of the party again. Our assault was decisively repulsed, anyhow."

"That has nothing to do with Blanche Beauvais. She is in yonder cabin."

Starbuck pointed to the second building, and then added in an intense voice:

"She is there, and it remains to be seen whether I, or that accursed renegade will have her!"

"The girl here!" echoed Killough in surprise.

"Yes. Mason and Jayne were caught in the cave when the gunmakers went in, though not discovered, and they kidnapped Blanche and brought her here. She is now in my charge, and I await to hear whether I am to keep her, or hand her over to the renegade. Lieutenant Killough, I await your answer!"

The speaker threw the weight of his person heavily upon his rifle, as he stood with his hands clasped over its muzzle, and looked his superior full in the face. He had somewhat regained his composure, but it was not of a kind to encourage Killough. He was deeply in earnest, and his dogged firmness did not promise well for a peaceable settlement of the trouble.

"My dear Starbuck," said Killough, with unusual gentleness, as well as embarrassment, "you place me in a serious predicament. What can I do? How can I take back what I have said to Sweeping Eagle? I have promised Blanche to him, and he is so high-tempered that he will stoutly rebel if I disappoint him. Why, the League itself may be jeopardized by such a thing. Sweeping Eagle is, really, Sitting Bull's own agent in our operations, and we may lose every one of our red allies by offending him."

"Am I to understand that you still favor the renegade?"

"How can I do otherwise?"

"There's no law to compel you," sullenly returned Starbuck.

"I am sorry you feel thus, Burt. Anything else that I can do for you shall be done."

"You are very kind!"

Starbuck spoke ironically, and then, suddenly throwing his rifle across his shoulder, strode away. Killough called after him, but he gave no heed. In a few seconds the darkness hid him from view.

"Curse the luck!" Killough muttered, and then went on toward the cabins with annoyance visible in every motion.

Walt Wilkins touched Somerville's arm and chuckled.

"This is encouragin'," he observed, in a low tone. "Thar is strife, contention an' bad feelin' among the enemy, an' I've knowed good ter come out o' sech upheavals."

"I hope it will break out."

"Mebbe 'twill. But now, what o' Blanche? Starbuck says she is in the second cabin."

"Yes, and I am in favor of immediate action. The darkness will hide our movements, and we may never again have a chance as good as the present. Ah! both cabins have been lighted. That is bad!"

"Don't feel discouraged, lad, fur luck is a queer thing. It may flop 'round ter our side o' the question any minute. Foller me, lad, an' we'll see what kin be done."

The veteran paused for a moment to mark out their course, and then the movement was begun.

In order to make it in any degree safe they were obliged to resort to a considerable detour, and Walt led the way where they were concealed by rocks and bushes as much as possible. The fire in the open space threw a broad light about, now that it was fully dark, and the bustling cooks made a scene of activity. Killough, Starbuck and Sweeping Eagle were not as busy, and care had to be exercised to avoid any encounter. Walt was equal to the emergency, and they soon gained a position at the rear of the cabin.

All was darkness there, owing to the fact that the fire was in front of the little building, and they were still comparatively safe. Investigation showed that the rear wall was of unbroken logs, but the sound of voices inside aroused Walt's curiosity so much that he removed a little of the chinking with his knife.

Both he and Somerville then looked eagerly through.

Blanche was there, but she was not alone. Killough stood leaning against the doorway, his dark face gloomy and thoughtful; but nearer to her was Sweeping Eagle, who was talking earnestly.

The white Sioux tried to be eloquent and persuasive, and his flow of language was certainly unbounded. He declared that he loved Blanche devotedly; that if she married him she should

have every luxury that money could procure, and never know what labor, privation and sorrow were; that when the work of the League was done she, as his wife, would have honor done her by the whole world; and that they would then go to Europe, if she desired, and outstrip the sovereigns and millionaires of the Old World.

Blanche listened to this because she could not do otherwise.

Disdaining to even argue with him, she received all that he said in contemptuous silence or answered only in monosyllables, and Sweeping Eagle went from one point of anger to another, until he explosively broke forth:

"So you disdain to speak to me, my would-be grand lady? Well, you shall have your own way just now, but, mark my words, you will live to repent your conduct. You have declined with scorn to benefit by my kindness; when next I approach you, I shall show the iron hand!"

Flinging forth these words viciously, he turned and strode from the cabin. Killough followed in silence, and the door closed upon the prisoner.

Wild West Walt turned to Somerville.

"It never'll do fur us ter go 'round front, fur they'll be sure ter see us, an' thar ain't no win-der. We must make a hole through the roof, which can be done 'thout much trouble. Give me a lift, lad, an' put me up on thar."

Somerville obeyed, and Walt attacked the roof in earnest. It was composed of strips of bark, but these were so interwoven that it required five minutes to remove them. It was done at last, and as the light came up through the opening, the veteran bent down to speak to Blanche.

He did not speak, however, but remained gazing blankly.

The cabin was vacant!

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### STARBUCK STRIKES.

WALT turned a puzzled face toward his companion.

"What now?" Somerville anxiously asked.

"The Princess ain't hyar."

"Then where in the world is she?"

"That's jest what I don't know," the veteran replied. "I ain't clear on but one p'int, an' that is that while I've been t'arin' this hole through, she's either been taken out, or has slipped away herself."

"The latter can hardly be the fact. If she had made her escape, she would promptly have come around the cabin to get in the dark shadows. Besides, I think I heard them fasten the door on her. No, she has not escaped; they have taken her away while our attention was occupied here, and we are no nearer the accomplishment of our purpose than ever."

Somerville spoke bitterly, but Walt slid down from the roof with a determined expression on his face.

"We're goin' ter solve this hyar mystery, by sixty!" he averred. "We've set out ter find the Princess, an' we'll do it ef we t'ar the roof right off this peak in the attempt. Let me take a squint!"

He looked cautiously around the side of the cabin. The open space had more men in it than before, but these were now all Sioux. A hundred yards up the ravine blazed a second fire; there was the camp of Killough's men, and the more satisfactory one had been given to Sweeping Eagle's men.

"I reckon we may safely set it down that the Princess has been taken ter Killough's own quarters," he said, after explaining these facts to Somerville. "We'll git out o' hyar, an' work over yonder. Be oncommon car'ful, lad, fur these red varmint ain't deef—not much! I reckon we be, or the Princess could never been taken out unheard by us. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

While talking Walt had been looking out their best course, and he now indicated it with his finger—it was up the rock. He was as cool as ever, but the frequency of his glances toward the Indian camp indicated that his mind was not wholly at ease.

The light of the fires shone so strongly upon the surrounding rocks that retreat would certainly be attended with more or less danger.

The ascent was begun, and it soon became clear that Walt had used good judgment in marking out their course. Under no condition could it have been safe, with the Sioux and the five below, but he had made the best of it.

Probably the retreat would have been safely executed only for an unlucky circumstance. They were half-way up the ascent when, without any warning, they came face to face with several Indians. The latter were descending to the camp, and had expected the meeting as little as Walt and Somerville.

The ranger did some quick thinking. The Sioux outnumbered them, and in the valley were any quantity of other warriors. Walt determined to try and pass as one of Killough's men. As a plan this was very good, but it was not destined to be successful. Before he could speak one of the Indians pointed to Somerville.



"The gunmaker!" he cried. "The white dogs are escaping! Seize them!"

Walt saw that subterfuge was out of the question.

"Run, lad, run!" he shouted to Hugh, and then knocked down the nearest Sioux.

Another moment and both the white men were in retreat. Walt's flight was a short one, however; he unluckily planted his foot on a flat, insecure stone, it tipped, and he fell back helplessly into the midst of their enemies.

In the wild scramble over the rocks, Somerville did not notice this. He heard footsteps close behind him, and, supposing that Walt was at hand, ran on at full speed, trying to keep rocks and bushes between him and the enemy, for he expected a shot every moment. The fact that none came, finally impressed him as being so peculiar that he turned his head.

The light footsteps were still sounding behind him, and he saw his fellow runner. The view was a startling one; instead of Walt Williams, he saw a Sioux warrior bounding after him like a panther, and, as the darkness was not profound, he could see that the red-man held a gleaming knife ready for use.

Somerville's brief delay had been enough to enable the pursuer to close the gap, and in a twinkling he pounced upon the gunmaker. The latter saw the knife sweeping toward his breast, and instinctively threw out his own hand. The blow was averted, and, a moment later, the two grappled.

The gunmaker realized his danger and, also, the fact that he must depend upon himself. He was strong and skillful, and he knew that he must now resort to these gifts to save his life. Grasping the Sioux firmly he drove him back rapidly, and the red-skin could not possibly stop. All he could do was to keep his feet, and he did this only for a moment. His heels struck a rock, and over he went upon a ledge with stunning force.

Somerville fell upon him, and the warrior gave a convulsive start, a groan, and then lay still. The shock had temporarily driven the breath from his body.

The victor glanced around, saw that no other foe was near, and then drew his knife. The instinct of battle prompted him to end the Sioux's career then and there, but the blow was not struck. There was nothing brutal or merciless in his disposition, and he would not strike an unconscious man.

Quickly arising, he secured his rifle, which had fallen when the red-man made his attack, and then all his thoughts turned to Walt. What had become of the veteran?

The gunmaker would not leave the place without having this question solved, and he made a detour and worked back to the low wall of the valley. He met no enemy on the way, and, after some cautious maneuvering, gained position in a thicket near the scene of their first surprise.

Parting the leaves he looked down into the valley.

Almost the first person he saw was Wild West Walt—a prisoner. A circle of red-skins surrounded the veteran, and Sweeping Eagle was evidently talking with him—a precarious situation, yet Walt was outwardly the coolest man there. Captivity had not put any restraint on his tongue, and he was using that member freely.

Somerville was in a most disconsolate mood. Blanche was gone, he knew not where, and Walt was a prisoner. What ought he to do? What could he do?

As he was revolving these questions in his mind, a man pushed through the line of Indians and confronted Sweeping Eagle. The newcomer was Burt Starbuck, and even from his covert, Somerville saw that the young man's face was flushed, and his eyes unnaturally bright from some cause. He spoke in an abrupt, curt way:

"Chief, I want a word with you."

"Say on!"

Sweeping Eagle spoke calmly, but his manner was anything but friendly. If he did not know Starbuck to be his rival, he did, at least, recognize an enemy in him.

"I want to speak of Blanche Beauvais."

"Say on!"

"Like you, I love the girl; I loved her before you ever even saw her—"

"Doubtful, but—say on!"

The renegade's manner did not grow encouraging, nor did Starbuck waver in what seemed to be a fixed purpose.

"I spoke to Killough before you did; I told him that I loved and claimed her. He unjustly gave her to you, and you allowed her to escape. She is again a captive, taken by my men. I appeal to you, chief, to do justice. Give the girl to me!"

"You ask too much, Starbuck."

"I only ask justice."

"Would you give her up?"

"If some one else was ahead of me, I should not, in any case, consider that I had any claim upon her."

"Your argument is all right, but I really can't surrender the girl. Killough gave her to me, and I have set my heart on her. More

than that, I knew her long before you did—knew her when you were less than five years old. She was an infant then, and I saved her life at peril of my own. I really do not think you will ask me to yield such a claim; I claim the life that I saved. I am sorry that you have a fancy for her, Starbuck, but trust all may be amicably settled."

Sweeping Eagle spoke persuasively. It had occurred to him that enmity between him and one of Killough's leading men would be unwise, and he hoped to stay the storm.

Starbuck, however, still glowered at him sullenly.

"Will you let me see Blanche a moment?" he asked.

The chief consented, and they advanced toward the cabin.

Somerville watched in wonder. Was it really possible that neither man knew that Blanche was gone?

The renegade raised the bar from the outside of the door, and swung the latter back. He took one step forward, and then paused. His face was blank with surprise. Starbuck was close behind, but as he saw that the cabin was empty, he turned upon Sweeping Eagle with flashing eyes.

"Traitor!" he cried, "what trick are you trying to play?"

"None, upon my word!" the chief declared. "The girl had been rescued, or has escaped."

"It is false!" Starbuck hoarsely retorted. "You have taken her away secretly. You scoundrell! she was my prisoner; my men captured her, and she had never been yielded to you. You have played a sharp trick, but, by the fiends, it shall not avail you. If I can't have her, nobody else shall. Traitor, this is your reward!"

A revolver flashed in the light. The renegade uttered an almost imploring cry, but it was not heeded. Starbuck's arm was stationary for a moment, and then came a sharp crack. Sweeping Eagle clapped both hands to his breast, reeled and fell heavily to the ground. A moment more and Starbuck was in rapid retreat.

#### CHAPTER XXXVII.

PIERRE REYNAUD.

ONE of the Sioux at once hurried to the fallen man's side. He made a brief, critical survey, and then stood erect with flashing eyes. His comrades had begun to gather around him, and he addressed them vehemently.

"Warriors of the Sioux nation, our chief is dead. The pale-face dog aimed well, and the great Sweeping Eagle is done with this life."

A murmur ran through the dark circle; the whispering of vengeance to come.

"Brothers," continued the spokesman, "our chief has been murdered. What are we to do?"

"Put the murderer to torture!" answered a brawny warrior.

"Shall we not go to Killough and demand that the slayer be given to us for vengeance?"

Every Sioux seemed to answer in the affirmative.

"Then let us go at once. I, Wolf-that-Bites, am now your chief, and I demand blood for blood. We will go to Killough's camp, and he must give up the white dog who struck without warning. He is a coward, and his cries when he meets our torture will be music for our dead chief's ears, as he journeys to the land of souls."

Taking a few long strides he grasped his rifle tightly, and turned his face toward the outlaw camp. At that moment, however, he remembered Walt Wilkins, and turned toward the second cabin. Then he had a second surprise.

Walt was gone!

At that very moment the veteran was standing on the rocks with Somerville. The latter had done work worthy of an old borderman. When Wolf-that-Bites began to speak he saw his chance; he saw that the Indians were so excited over the death of their white chief that they were oblivious to all else; and with quick, yet careful movements he hastened to Walt's side.

A few strokes of his knife liberated the ranger, and both then retreated to the rocks. At that moment came the discovery.

"The white dogs have stolen our prisoner!" cried Wolf-that-Bites. "If Killough has consented to all, we be to him. Go out, Lighfoot, and you, Red Cyclone and Shooting Lightning, and bring every red warrior. If Killough will not do justice to the Sioux, they will gain justice by force."

A murmur of approval went up from the warriors, and as Wolf-that-Bites started for the upper camp, they followed quickly after. Every face expressed determination, and as they actually believed that Wild West Walt had been taken away by Killough, that man had a hurricane brewing over his devoted head.

Walt Wilkins chuckled with great satisfaction.

"This is as it should be," he declared, "an of them two gangs will only fall on each other, tooth an' nail, thar may be some hope yit."

"At any rate, Sweeping Eagle's mischief is done," added Somerville.

"Yes, an' I reckon Jud Killough will find Wolf-that-Bites worthy o' his name. Great snakes! this is our chance, sure enough. In the

course o' natur', the Princess must be at Killough's camp, an' we'll larn wisdom from your last act an' pluck the fruit while it's on the tree. While them varmints are quarrelin', we'll raid the camp an' git the Princess. Come on, lad; come on, an' we'll see what's ter be see'd. Our chance has come in a funny way. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

While speaking the ranger had been striding along the ridge without regard to secrecy, and Somerville kept by his side. Their course was rougher and less direct, and when they reached the boundary of the outlaw camp, the Sioux had already arrived, and Wolf-that-Bites was in animated, if not hostile, conversation with Killough.

Suddenly Walt paused.

"Stay hyar, lad," he directed. "One kin do this work ez wal ez two—you see the s'arch will be simple. Jest you stay hyar an' wait fur me."

"Go on!"

Somerville spoke tersely. He recognized the wisdom of Walt's plan, and had become intensely interested in the scene in the valley. A veritable storm was brewing there. The two parties, red and white, were confronting each other, and the Sioux chief was speaking rapidly. His words were inaudible to Somerville, but it was clear that he was demanding the surrender of Starbuck to his men, and equally clear that Killough was opposing the demand and trying to quell the storm.

Somerville every moment expected to see the two bands come to blows.

He was still watching the scene when footsteps caused him to look around quickly. He had half-raised his rifle, but it was Walt Wilkins, returning.

"What news?" Somerville quickly asked.

"Lad, the Princess ain't thar."

"Not there?"

"No."

"Then where in the world is she?"

"She must hev escaped from the cabin?"

"How could she? The door was barred on the outside."

Walt rubbed his forehead in perplexity.

"It's mighty myster'u's, by sixty!" he declared.

"Can it be that the door was insecurely barred, that she managed to open it, and then replaced the bar and fled?"

"Now thar's an idee fur ye!" said Walt, brightening up perceptibly. "I ain't over-sanguine, but it's wuth lookin' inter. We will look inter it. In the course o' natur', ef she got away she'd steer right fur the cave. We'll go that way, an' make hay as much as possible while them creetur's wrangle. I hope they'll git inter a hot dispute, an' trounce each other like sixty."

They started at once, and as there did not seem to be any great need of caution, made good time.

They had nearly reached the wall of the chasm down which they had come by means of the knotted lassoes, when Walt suddenly stretched himself out on the ground with catlike quickness. Somerville had neither seen nor heard anything, but he imitated the movement with all possible celerity.

Almost immediately he saw two persons approaching, but they paused a few yards away.

"Pierre, where are you taking me?" asked one.

It was a feminine voice, and Somerville partly started up. He had recognized Blanche, and was eager to go to her, but Walt drew him back to the ground.

"Stiddy, lad, stiddy! Wait an' listen."

Blanche's companion made answer:

"I am taking you to the cave, mademoiselle."

"I want to trust you, monsieur, for you are one of my countrymen, but I see the light of the outlaw camp yonder, and it is a fact that you are one of them."

"Didn't I rescue you from the cabin?" was the reproachful answer.

"Yes, but I am aware that there is ill feeling between Sweeping Eagle and Burt Starbuck. What proof have I that you are not working for the latter?"

"I don't care a rush for Starbuck; I am helping you because you are Blanche Beauvais, and I am Pierre Reynaud. If your friends will let me go with them, I am done with Killough's band. You had better let me be your friend, mademoiselle. Sweeping Eagle, whose real name is Francois Ayot, has told you a story to suit himself about your parentage. Trust me, mademoiselle, and I will tell a better, truer one."

"Pierre Reynaud, can you tell me aught of that dreadful affair?" Blanche excitedly cried.

"I can tell all!"

"Then lead on—lead on! I will trust you."

"Good! You shall not repent it."

Reynaud turned his face toward the cave, but at that moment Somerville sprung to his feet.

"Blanche! Blanche!" he eagerly exclaimed.

The girl turned quick—in alarm, it seemed—but even in the darkness, she recognized the gunmaker.

"Thank heaven, it is Hugh!" she cried, joyfully.

Walt Wilkins left them to their meeting, and turned to the Frenchman.

"Reynaud, I'm glad ter see ye pannin' out so



wal, by hickory! I didn't think it on ye, when we had ye in the cave at Tombstone Rock—I reely didn't. Ter put it plain I thought ye an uncommon dirty vagabond, ef not wu'ss, an' now ye show up as protector fur the Princess. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

"I've been a good deal of a hard customer," Reynaud replied, "but I knew Blanche Beauvais of old, and am going to be her friend."

"Good fur you. So you rescued her from the cabin?"

"Yes. I expected to lose my life in trying, but could I have died in a better cause? I took her from the cabin, but, thinking it unsafe to conduct her to the cave, would have taken her to some other refuge. She lost confidence in me, however, and I was obliged to guide her here—"

The speaker paused. A single rifle-shot had sounded from the direction of the allies' camp. It was followed by half a dozen others, and then out in the air rung the Sioux war-whoop, evidently sounded by over a score of warriors. It was cut short, however, in a louder sound, as many rifles sounded as one.

"Great snakes! they're at it!" cried Walt. "Shoot me fur a catamount ef red an' white ain't goin' fur each other like cats an' dogs. The Old Nick is ter pay over thar!"

His words seemed well founded, for from the direction of the camp came the mingled sound of rifle reports, shouts and war-whoops. The allies were fighting among themselves!

#### CHAPTER XXXVIII.

##### THE DREAM OF POWER FADES AWAY.

"THIS is our harvest season," added Walt, quickly. "Ef them chaps are in dead 'arnest—an' I ain't a doubt but they be—we hev got a chance ter slide away while they're at it, I'll bet my rifle. The dispute will draw all the men from the front o' the cave, an' our party kin slip out while we ain't guarded. Hugh, you an' Reynaud guard the Princess in the gulch, while I walk in an' see Black Hills Ben."

The veteran hurried the trio down into the gulch to what he thought a proper point, and then disappeared up the open way with long strides.

Somerville was not wholly pleased with this plan. They had a chance to re-enter the cave; they had passed it by, and were planning a flight which might be one of deadly danger.

A period of waiting followed which was also one of keenest suspense. The sounds of strife continued for several minutes, more or less regularly, from the camp of the allies, and it went to indicate that a deadly conflict was raging there. The crack of rifles—the whoops of the Indians—the shouts of the outlaws—all combined made a wild medley.

Somerville and Reynaud tried to cheer and encourage Blanche, but the task was hard from the first, and when all sounds of strife died away, and utter silence reigned around them, it grew doubly hard.

The allies were no longer busy with their feud—might they not appear at any moment?

Other minutes passed—minutes that seemed interminably long—and still there was no sign from their friends. Never before had Somerville found his calmness so severely tested. He even thought of going to the end of the gulch, and sounding the prearranged signal to those within, but feared they had already gone.

Suddenly a dark figure appeared in the shadow of the rocks, coming, not from the direction of the cave but the opposite way, and Walt's cheerful voice broke the silence:

"Did ye think I was never comin'? Wal, it has been a lengthy time, but thar was a heap o' work ter do. We're all out o' the cave, an' ready ter run, only waitin' fur you, so ye see yer patience will be rewarded. Foller me."

The veteran led the way, and rapidly the party went down the gulch until they reached the slope. This they ascended, and there was the whole party of gunmakers and their friends.

Basil Beauvais was inclined to make a demonstrative greeting to Blanche, but the borderman would not allow any one to talk then. Instant flight was necessary. The battle of the allies had ceased, and nobody knew when fresh danger would beset the fugitives.

The little party started, with Walt at the front, but had gone no more than twenty rods when a dark form partially rose from the ground in front of them. The ranger was obliged to check his horse to avoid a collision, and then a hoarse voice sounded from the object in advance.

"Who are you that ride this way? My eyes are blind with coming dissolution, and I can see nothing. If ye are of the League, listen to me!"

Walt uttered an exclamation and sprung from his horse. He recognized that voice: the speaker was Judson Killough. Walt saw that the outlaw chief, though merely sitting up, was swaying dizzily, and he caught him in his strong arms. There was a moisture of the garments over the stricken man's breast which confirmed a part that he had said.

"I'm with ye, lieutenant," Walt answered. "Say on, ef ye have ought ter say."

"I know you not," gasped Killough, "but it is a white man's voice. Comrade, I am dying,

and with me goes the Grand Chief of the League, and the League, itself. All, all is doomed! Ah! how my life ebbs away! The accursed Sioux struck deeply, and my sands are running out. This blindness—this terrible weakness—all foretells the end. I die, but I would not die unavenged."

"What kin I do fur you?" Walt soberly asked.

"Tell Burt Starbuck to avenge me; tell him never to rest until Wolf-that-Bites and his warriors are swept away. There are more white men than red-devils near here—tell Starbuck to hurl the men on the red traitors and avenge me. I got my death by upholding him, and now let him do his duty. Ah! why, why did he ever take a fancy for that girl. It has slain me and ruined the League!"

He paused for a moment, gasped for breath, and then went on with the last of his ebbing strength:

"Yes, the League is doomed, and what I planned will never be. I was the Grand Chief, and I, the only man who could hold the wild allies together, or plan such a work—I am dying. Oh! why must I go before my work is done? A malediction on the Sioux! So fade my hopes—my dream of power. So fades the greatest scheme man ever formed; so fades my life. The end is near!"

"You're ekul ter a dozen men yet," said Walt, who could not avoid a grain of pity for the man in his fallen condition.

"I am—about gone!" gasped the outlaw. "I care nothing for life, but my great scheme—the League—ambition—all is vanishing. Tell Starbuck—revenge! Ah! I die!"

There was a pause. Then Wild West Walt arose, lifted the heavy form, and laid it at one side where the passing horses would not bruise the body. It was no more—only a lifeless body. Judson Killough was dead!

Walt remounted his horse, spoke the single word, "Come!" and the fugitives rode on again. It was several minutes before the ranger had anything more to say, for his mind was on that impressive death-scene.

As they went on, and as conversation became less dangerous, Blanche, Reynaud and Beauvais managed to have an explanation, and the mystery of the girl's life was made plain.

When she was a child, Beauvais was a trapper. He left home when she was but a month old, and was gone seven months. When he returned his wife was dead, and Francois Ayot, a wild young fellow of his acquaintance, convinced him that his child—Blanche—was also dead, but produced another baby, which he claimed to have saved from death on the prairies when her parents were killed by Indians. The child had won Basil's heart, and he reared it as his own, though always believing it to be a waif.

Pierre Reynaud was now able to explain all. Ayot's story was a lie from beginning to end. He had entertained a grudge against Beauvais, and concocted the story merely to make the trapper unhappy. Really, Blanche was just what she had always supposed herself to be—Beauvais's own daughter. Reynaud had been in Ayot's confidence in the old days, but it was not until he saw Ayot transformed into Sweeping Eagle, and persecuting Blanche, that his conscience was awakened.

The truth was told at last, however, and a dark cloud swept from the mind of both Blanche and Beauvais.

All that night the party pressed on, and their success was a surprise to no one more than Walt, Ben Todd, Long Dave and Windfoot. These experienced borderers did not believe that the fight of the allies had done away with danger, and they were every moment expecting a collision.

Day dawned at last, and they halted a few minutes in a gulch to breakfast, and give the women a brief rest.

They started again, but had gone but a short distance when Windfoot reported suspicious signs, and, a moment later, a band of Sioux numbering over a hundred men appeared from a gulch not far away. The fugitives prepared for hot work, but when the Indian leader displayed a white flag, Black Hills Ben and Walt went forward to talk with him. It proved to be Wolf-that-Bites, but he was no longer in an openly hostile mood.

"Listen to me, white men," he said impressively, "I do not come as your enemy, but to foil Red Hand, whom you call Starbuck. Chief Killough is dead, and Starbuck fills his place, and Red Hand is on your trail; but the Sioux and outlaws are no longer friends. Wolf-that-Bites hates Starbuck, and would foil his plans. Let the Sioux be your friends, and go with you, and they will guard you from the white outlaws."

"This is rather a strange proposition," answered Todd. "What proof have we that you are sincere?"

"I swear it by the Master Life, be he the white man's God, or the red man's Manitou."

"Oaths are sometimes broken by white men—why not by Indians?" Black Hills Ben slowly asked.

"Listen! Five of my warriors shall go among your people unarmed, and with your guns at their heads. Even I will be the hostage—I, Wolf-that-Bites—if you wish. Any way to make

Starbuck full of anger. He has more men than Wolf-that-Bites, but if the Sioux dare not attack him, neither dare he attack the Sioux. Speak, Black Hills Ben; shall the red-men guard you until you reach your towns?"

Ben glanced at Wild West Walt, and the veteran nodded emphatically. That settled it, and the bargain was promptly consummated. Ten minutes later the gunmakers were on their way with their strange escort.

"I'll eat my rifle," said Long Dave, "ef this ain't suthin, new an' fresh. Never expected ter see the like on't, Walt."

"It is sorter interestin' ez a show. Notice how the Princess an' Somerville keep tergether. They ain't fools—in the course o' natur', they are talkin' business. Claudia Bennington looks brighter nor ever, d'yessce: an' I observe that Mister Dunstan Hughes ain't so surly ez he was. By the time we git ter town, he'll be meek enough; ef he ain't, he an' I'll have a dispute, an' I'll trounce him until he is in a pliable mood, by sixty!"

"That's business, brother Walt, an' ef you want help, call on me. I licked a feller once so bad that I carved him up in slices, like bread off'm a loaf, an' no slice over one-quarter o' an inch thick. He told me arterwards that he wouldn't fight me ag'in ef I'd give him a hoss an' bridle."

"Should s'pose not," answered Walt, "but some fellers ain't so easy ter lick. Knowed a doctor once who got ev'rybody down on him, an' they tried to lick him. His back was bared, an' a big six-footer went at him. The doctor never yelled, but chawed terbacker an' whistled a love-ditty. At the end o' three hours the whipper fell in a fit, an' another man took his turn. He lasted two hours. You may not believe it, Long Dave, but the 'hull poperation o' the place—'bout two thousan'—took a hack at him, an' all took sick an' give up, while he never turned a hair, or showed a mark, though he got away with an awful pile o' the weed. When the last on 'em was took sick the doctor broke his bonds, nursed 'em all back to health, an' forgave 'em freely; but when he left he took ev'ry cent o' money in town, an' the place went bankrupt. Chaw, Injun?"

Walt abruptly extended his tobacco to Windfoot, but the offer was declined. Walt urged his horse forward to where Somerville and Blanche rode together.

"Lad," he said, gravely, "ef we git ter the settlements all right, do you mean ter continuer business ez a gunmaker?"

"That epoch in my life is past," Somerville answered. "I wonder what is before World's End? We did not make a great quantity of weapons, and I am inclined to think there will be no more made there. I believe Killough was right when he said the League was dead. Anyhow, I shall make no more fire-arms."

"Mebbe you hev another engagement," and Walt looked slyly at Blanche.

"Now, Walt," cried the girl, with a smile, "do you want me to quarrel with you?"

"Great snakes, no: I wouldn't see yer pooty eyes turned on me in anger fur half o' the West. But I reckon thar's no danger; you and me onnerstan' each other, an' Hugh onnerstan's us both. Yes, I onnerstan', an' I sha'n't be s'prised ter hear o' a weddin'. Queer, ain't it, Walt Wilkins?"

Wolf-that-Bites kept his word, and, though the outlaws were seen at a distance, guided the fugitives safely and faithfully to the settlement. It was afterwards learned that, on his return, his party and Starbuck's fought, and the latter was slain. Wolf-that-Bites became a well-known warrior, and was by no means a merciless red-skin.

Dunstan Hughes was thoroughly subdued by the time the journey was over, and willingly gave the testimony in behalf of Edgar Wheaton. The latter, proved entirely innocent, was released, and he and Claudia were promptly married. They have lived happily to this day.

Somerville and Blanche were a second couple to join their destinies for life, and their union has been so full of light, love and peace, they have never regretted their adventures in and around World's End, since by these events they were brought together.

Of Beauvais, Bennington and Garrison there is nothing to add, except that they have prospered.

Wild West Walt, Ben Todd, Long Dave and Windfoot continued their old life. To them there is no other place equal to the mountains and prairies of the West.

As Killough prophesied, his death ended the great conspiracy. No other person among the members of the League had the strength of mind, the cunning and the ability to lead as he had done. The League and he died in the same hour.

A year after the scenes of our story, Walt Wilkins visited World's End. It was deserted and silent, and all that was once in Paradise Valley was gone to ruin—destroyed, perhaps, by Wolf-that-Bites, but red-men and white were alike gone. Even "Pansy" failed to scent another living creature, and as Walt rode away he felt like one moving through a graveyard.

It was the sepulcher of Killough's ambition!

THE END.



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- 2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.
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- 89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
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- 103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
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- 134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
- 139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
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- 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
- 172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
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- 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
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- 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
- 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
- 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
- 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
- 235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
- 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
- 253 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
- 259 Outlaws and Cross; or, The Ghouls of the Sea.
- 261 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
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- 277 Ash and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
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- 399 The New Monte Cristo.
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- 347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
- 352 The Desperate Dozen.
- 365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
- 374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
- 382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
- 392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
- 400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
- 407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
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- 421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
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- 185 Man Spider; or, The Beautiful Sphinx.
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- 288 Electro Pete, the Man of Fire.
- 306 The Roughs of Richmond.
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- 334 The Cipher Detective; or, Mark Magic's New Trail.
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- 67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
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- 105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
- 119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
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- 141 Equinox Tom, the Bul' of Red Rock.
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- 165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
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- 114 The Gentleman from Pike.
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- 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
- 251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.
- 280 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.
- 299 Three of a Kind; or, Tiger Dick, Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport.
- 338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
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- 107 Richard Talbot, of Cincinnati.
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- 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
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- 320 The Genteel Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
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- 354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
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